



Henrietta Lacks was a black tobacco farmer from southern Virginia who was diagnosed with cervical cancer when she was 30. A doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, MD, took a piece of her tumor without telling her (without permission) and sent it down the hall to scientists who had been trying to grow tissues in culture for decades without success. No one knows why, but Henrietta’s cells never died. Her cells were the first immortal human cells ever grown in culture. They were essential to developing the polio vaccine. They went up in the first space missions to see what would happen to cells in zero gravity. Many scientific landmarks since then have used her cells, including cloning, gene mapping, chemotherapy, and in vitro fertilization. When the cells were taken, they were given the code name HeLa, for the first two letters in Henrietta and Lacks. Today, anonymizing samples is a very important part of doing research on cells. But that wasn’t something doctors worried about much in the 1950s, so they weren’t terribly careful about her identity. When some members of the press got close to finding Henrietta’s family, the researcher who’d grown the cells made up a pseudonym—Helen Lane—to throw the media off track. Other pseudonyms, like Helen Larsen, eventually showed up, too. Her real name didn’t really leak out into the world until the 1970s.

So much of science today revolves around using human biological tissue of some kind. For scientists, cell samples are often just like tubes or fruit flies—they’re just inanimate tools that are always there in the lab. The people behind those samples often have their own thoughts and feelings about what should happen to their tissues, but they’re usually left out of the equation. Today, the HeLa cells have contributed to/been included in a plethora of clinical research studies; many of which have been successful! Take a moment to research HeLa cells for yourself. My hope is that you’ll learn the importance of knowing and understanding what you are agreeing to when you have medical procedures. Also, if you haven’t done so already, check out the movie titled “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks”. It’s very eye opening and causes much debate over bio-medical research. ❤️🖤💚

Source:<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/henrietta-lacks-and-debate-over-ethics-bio-medical-research/>

