Who Is Henrietta Lacks and Why Are HeLa Cells Important?

April 23, 2012
By Linda Draper
Outreach Librarian, Wayne State University Shiffman Medical Librarian
LDraper@wayne.edu

Henrietta Lacks is the subject of the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. This woman became famous many years after her death in the 1950's because the cells from her cervical cancer are still alive in a prolific cell line used extensively in research. Tissue was taken from her when she was being treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital, and was cultured under the identification code "HeLa" derived from the first two letters her first name (Henrietta) and her last name (Lacks).

Mystery Woman's Cancer Cells

But for many years no one even knew Henrietta Lacks was her real name, as some thought she was Helen Lane, or some other fictional character, but then perhaps no one really cared. After all, she was a poor, African-American woman who happened to be born in Virginia's tobacco country and later moved to Baltimore, Maryland near to a medical facility that was dedicated to serving the indigent, and it was the only place she could go to get medical care when she had little money and the misfortune of having an aggressive form of cervical cancer.

Critical Key to Research

The story – the life journey of a hard-working farmer, wife and mother of five children, a caring and loving member of an extended family and community, and who died at barely 30 year old from a painful and devastating disease, with little money and no medical insurance is compelling enough. But it's even more fascinating because of what appears to be a seemingly unrelated story of how some particularly unique cancer cells became the basis of an entire research industry that advances scientific knowledge through vaccine discoveries, space flight and radiation exposure, and multiple other scientific and medical studies. All this went happened, and her family didn’t even know Henrietta Lacks’ cells were key to it all.
Medical Ethics, Privacy and Other Issues

This book is a starting point to bring up many questions related to medical ethics, patient privacy and rights, health literacy, disparities and inequities in minority health, abuses and distrust, health care delivery, medical research, pharmaceutical and research industries. It also captures the dedication and persistence of the author, Rebecca Skloot who was driven to learn about and write the very eloquent and readable true story behind the “HeLa” cells – who was the “real” person they were named after and why the cells removed from her body are still important almost 60 years later. Ms. Skloot visited Detroit on March 26, 2011 as part of the Detroit Public Library (DPL) and partners’ 2011 One Book One Community program. Read more about the DPL event, and see pictures from other outreach events at this link www.lib.wayne.edu/shiffmanoutreach and click PAST EVENTS

Book Availability

Copies of the print book and audio book are available to check out from the Shiffman Medical Library to WSU affiliates. Many public libraries in the area, including the Detroit Public Library (DPL) also have copies to lend to residents. The paperback edition was published March 8, 2011, so local book stores and online book sellers have more options available. Rebecca Skloot is writing a juvenile version of the book for young persons. She is also collaborating with Oprah Winfrey and Alan Ball to produce an HBO film version of the Henrietta Lacks and HeLa Cells story. To read, see and hear more about this award-winning book and the fascinating story of Henrietta Lacks and HeLa Cell Line, visit the author’s website http://rebeccaskloot.com

World Book Night - April 23, 2012

Twenty (20) copies of the book The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks will be distributed at no cost to community recipients at S.A.Y Clinic in Highland Park, MI as part of an international event called World Book Night, on Monday, April 23, 2012. Dr. Linda Roth of WSU School of Medicine, Linda Draper from WSU Shiffman Medical Library Outreach and students from the WSU School of Medicine student organization of the Black Medical Association will coordinate the World Book Night Book Give-Away. Read more about World Book Night at www.worldbooknight.com or check out the Face Book page www.facebook.com/worldbooknightusa