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The Injustice of Ignorance

Nicholas Tavares

The practice of removing patients' tissues without consent was acceptable when doctors sampled Henrietta Lacks' cancerous tumor. The act was a means of learning more about the human body, a way to advance science and medicine. Although scientists used Henrietta's tissue for the greater good, they committed an even greater evil by leaving the entire Lacks family in the dark, allowing them to languish in the midst of poverty and ignorance while Henrietta's tissue revolutionized the field of medicine and created a multi-million dollar industry. Today, an issue exists that parallels Henrietta's story and her contributions to the world. Much like the unethical practices of the medical world were exposed and eradicated, the ethics and morality of government and politics remain under scrutiny. Patients depend on the morality of their doctors as citizens trust in the integrity of their government.

Taxes are the HeLa cells keeping this nation afloat. While Henrietta unknowingly contributed to the medical field with her body, every U.S citizen contributes to her country with money. Without this money, the U.S would flounder in a far greater sea of debt than the dangerous waters in which it currently splashes. The idea of taxes is fair, as is the idea of using cells for research. However, it is in the relationship between doctor and patient, government and citizen, where inequality is found. A patient, often ignorant and fearful of sickness and medicine, relies on a doctor to help and heal her. Citizens trust in their government to utilize their tax money intelligently, to defend their nation, and to preserve the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. If this relationship is not upheld, John Locke's social contract between a government and its people becomes nullified, undermining the essential purpose of government. People must

recognize their own purpose and role in government to live happily under the protective hold of authority. Accordingly, U.S. citizens must understand the U.S. government to live freely and be involved in their country, just as Deborah Lacks needed to learn about her mother's death and cells in order to find happiness.

The idea that ignorance is bliss is often true. However, an injustice is present when ignorance interferes with freedom and happiness. Henrietta's daughter, Deborah Lacks, suffered her entire life. She struggled to learn about her mother's death and contribution to science. As a result, she wished she had a better education, saying, "If I'd had more of it, maybe this whole thing about my mother wouldn't have been so hard" (Skloot 251-252). Similarly, all U.S. citizens must know their role in the United States in order to be happy. The U.S. government extracts taxes, its figurative HeLa cells, from every American body. However, every citizen is entitled a right to vote, an ability to take credit for her contribution and make a difference. Unfortunately, in 2008 only 57.1% of Americans voted for a presidential candidate. Even fewer voters were at the polls in 2010, as 37% of Americans voted for their U.S. Representatives ("The" *Voting-Age*). It is a shame that more Americans do not exercise their right to vote, their small power to elect an ethical leader to head the U.S government.

Sixty years ago, doctors sometimes exploited and deceived patients. There are occasions in history when the United States government also deceived its people. Two former Presidents were impeached as a result of their own lack of integrity. If unethical leaders or hidden secrets exist, government can look like a corrupt research center instead of a healing doctor's office. However, every citizen lends a small hand in electing the most moral and intelligent leaders possible. The power of the individual can surmount injustice and influence the world. Henrietta Lacks, whose cells were used "to test the effects of steroids, chemotherapy drugs, hormones,

vitamins, and environmental stress,” and whose cells enlightened scientists on the “extreme conditions of deep-sea diving [and] spaceflight,” was a normal human being (Skloot 102). Miraculously, her body helped scientists create vaccines for polio and study cancer. Henrietta Lacks changed the world. Although the Lacks family suffered the injustice of not knowing about HeLa cells, the legend that Henrietta’s cells leave behind immortalizes her memory. It aptly displays the strength and courage of her spirit, a spirit that should inspire people to make a difference in the world and leave their own legacy.

Works Cited

- Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011. Print.
- “The 2012 Statistical Abstract.” *Voting-Age Population and Voter Participation*. U.S. Census Bureau, n.d. Web. 09 Aug. 2012