

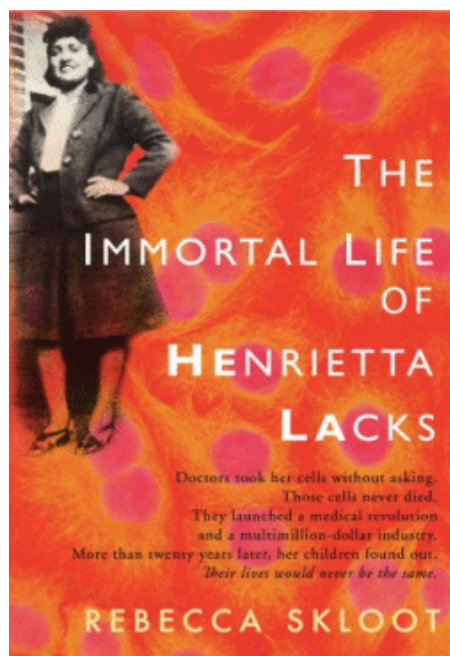
# The First Immortal Human Cancer Cells: the Story Behind the Story

Oncology Grand Rounds

Black History Month Presentation

Monday, February 15, 2010

4:00 P.M. Bluemle Life Sciences Building, 233 S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street



Henrietta Lacks, known to scientists as **HeLa**, was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine. The first “immortal” human cells grown in culture, they are still alive today, though she has been dead for more than sixty years. If you could pile all HeLa cells ever grown onto a scale, they’d weigh more than 50 million metric tons—as much as a hundred Empire State Buildings. Henrietta’s family did not learn of her “immortality” until more than twenty years after her death, when scientists investigating HeLa began using her husband and children in research without informed consent. And though the cells had launched a multimillion-dollar industry that sells human biological materials, her family never saw any of the profits.

The story of the Lacks family—past and present—is inextricably connected to the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, the birth of bioethics, and the legal battles over whether we control the stuff we are made of.

HeLa cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the effects of the atom bomb; helped lead to important advances like in vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene mapping; and have been bought and sold by the billions—yet Henrietta Lacks remains virtually unknown, buried in an unmarked grave.

**REBECCA SKLOOT** is an award-winning science writer whose articles have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Discover*; *Columbia Journalism Review*; and elsewhere; and she is a contributing editor for *Popular Science* magazine. She has also been a correspondent for NPR and PBS. A former vice president of the National Book Critics Circle, she blogs at Culture Dish, hosted by *Seed Magazine's Science Blogs*. Skloot has an undergraduate degree in biomedical science from Colorado State University and an MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Pittsburgh. She has taught in the creative writing programs at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Memphis, and in the Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program at New York University. Her first book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Pick, was published by Crown Publishers in February 2010.



*Rebecca Skloot*

Book signing will be held  
immediately following the Grand  
Rounds Presentation