

HeLa cells controversy: Court poised to consider whether Henrietta Lacks' family lawsuit claiming her cells were stolen 70 years ago can continue

A federal judge will decide whether the family of Henrietta Lacks has enough legal standing to continue [their lawsuit](#) against the biotech company Thermo Fisher Scientific after the two sides argued in court [May 17] about the use of cells taken from Lacks over 70 years ago.

At question is whether Thermo Fisher — and other companies — ought to compensate Lacks' living descendants for products derived from cervical cancer cells taken without her consent while she was receiving treatment at Johns Hopkins in 1951. Lacks, a Black woman from Baltimore County, died soon after the cells were taken due to complications from the cancer treatment she received.

Known as HeLa cells, they have been used since for a variety of scientific and medical breakthroughs and treatments. Researchers in the early 1950s used them to develop the polio vaccine, and they were instrumental in mapping the human genome.

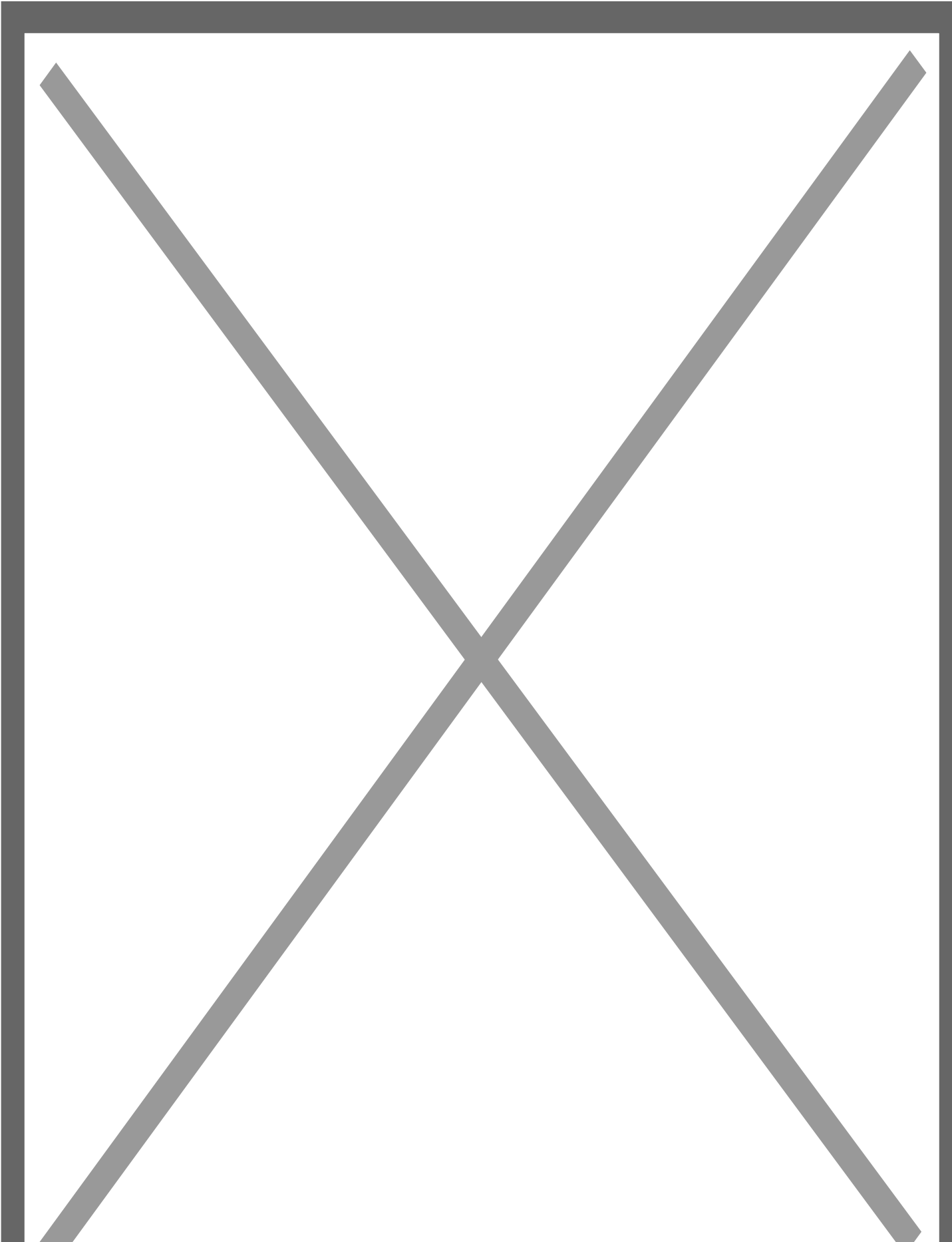
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Attorneys Ben Crump and Christopher Seeger argued in court that the lawsuit should be allowed to continue because of the continual harm being done against the Lacks family, comparing it to German families who held onto money taken from Holocaust victims.

"They stole pieces of her body; they shouldn't be allowed to benefit, to copyright those cells, to create new cell lines without even one phone call [to the Lacks family]," Seeger said.

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Mother of five, Henrietta Lacks died in 1951 at the age of 31. Credit: Courtesy of the Lacks family

[This is an excerpt. Read the original post here](#)