

Applying racial and social justice principles to case of Henrietta Lacks and her immortal cell lines

Today, thousands of human cell lines are sold profitably by companies, collected by institutes like the ATCC, and exchanged between cooperating scientists across borders. But in 1951, the development of the HeLa cell line represented a biotechnological revolution. It also represents a blatant case of unethical treatment of test subjects, structural racism in research, and pharmaceutical company greed. Rebecca Skloot, an American science journalist, published the results of her years of research into the scandalous HeLa story in 2010, bringing attention to the case and starting the fight for compensation for the descendants of Henrietta Lacks.

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In 2021, Henrietta Lacks' survivors started to fight for financial justice. They sued the pharmaceutical company Thermo Fisher Scientific, alleging that the company made a conscious decision to commercialize the cells and profit from a racist medical system. According to the lawsuit, there are at least 12 products marketed by Thermo Fisher that contain the HeLa cell line. "The exploitation of Henrietta Lacks represents the unfortunately common struggle experienced by Black people throughout US history. Indeed, Black suffering has fueled innumerable medical progress and profit, without just compensation or recognition," said Ben Crump, the widely known civil rights attorney representing the Lacks family, who previously represented the family of George Floyd.

In August it became known that the Lacks family and Thermo Fisher had agreed to a settlement, but details of the deal were not disclosed.

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