

On a wintery morning in January of 1951, Henrietta Lacks, a poor African–American farmer, went to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, because of bad stomach pains. The head of the research, George Otto Gey, decided to create a cell line—a group of cells that continue to divide without dying—and named it the HeLa cell line after the first two letters of Lacks's first and last name. The HeLa cell line would become the most important cell line in history; HeLa cells have been used in developing vaccines, in cloning, and in gene sequencing. The experience of Henrietta Lacks and the use of HeLa cells raises a number of ethical issues for science and medicine. At the time, Johns Hopkins was the only hospital near Lacks's home that treated African Americans. The biopsy results showed that Lacks had a malignant form of cancer in her cervix. They performed a biopsy—a procedure in which cells are taken from the body to test for diseases. On the night of October 4, 1951, Henrietta Lacks died at the age of 31. Soon after her death, researchers removed many more cancer cells from her body because they believed that they would be useful for a variety of studies. While Lacks was there, doctors noticed an unusual group of cells in her cervix. The biopsy also showed something unusual about Lacks's cancer: The cells were able to survive longer than any cancer cells the doctors had seen before. Because of this, the doctors later removed two more cell samples from Lacks for research.