My name is Elizabeth Wynn, I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute, and
today I'm going to be talking about the history and ethics of HeLa cells. I'm going to give a quick,
brief history of Henrietta Lacks and HeLa cells and then talk much more about the ethical issues that
surround them, because HeLa cells are incredibly important but they are also still very controversial.
I know that some of the people here have worked or continue to work with HeLa cells, I've actually
worked with them in the past, so I'm hoping at the end of this we can have a really interesting
discussion.
Starting with the woman herself: Henrietta Lacks. She was born August 1, 1920 – so one reason this
talk is titled HeLa100 is because it's the centenary of her birth. And you might see the hashtag
HeLa100 on Twitter, for example, information about this – she was born in 1920 and died October 4,
1951. She was born in Virginia and her name at birth was Loretta Pleasant and no one knows how
she went from Loretta to Henrietta or when that happened really.
She worked as a tobacco farmer from a young age. She didn't go to high school and she and many of
her family members worked on the tobacco farm at the plantation that their ancestors had been
enslaved at. She married in 1941 and moved to Connecticut with her husband so he could work in a
steel mill and she raised their five children.
In 1951, in January,] TJ
ET
Qq
0.000008871 0 595.32 841.92 re
W* n
BT
/F1 11.04 Tf
1 0 0 1 5009
BT
/F1 11.04 Tf
1 0 0 1 419.95 540.55 Tm

1
 The plaintiff’s name was actually John Moore.
And also a lot of unethical medical research entered the public consciousness. So one of the most
famous examples of this is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which I'm going to talk about a bit more
later, but here's another example using HeLa cells. In the 1950s and 60s, Chester Southam injected
HeLa cells into patients without their informed consent. He wanted to see whether people would
fight off the cells or whether they would develop cancer which is such an unethical procedure it's
hard to describe it as an experiment. And one other complicating factor of this is a lot of the patients
he used were prisoners.
So this type of unethical medical research that came to the published, public consciousness meant
that medical research became under, came under more scrutiny and there was much more focus on
how to make it ethical. In fact, it was in the 70s that the field of bioethics really came into its own,
became a thing.
And though there wasn't a lot of focus yet on the ethics of informed consent when it came to tissue
culture, like there wasn't the same outcry against it, the fact that medical research as a whole was
under so much scrutiny and there was so much focus on informed consent, using tissues from
people also came under that umbrella. So informed consent for research using tissue also became
standard.
I think that there are two other things which really changed how we view tissues taken from our
body. They're no longer viewed as waste materials, instead they're viewed as valuable. There are
two reasons for that.
Increased genetic understanding. As technology has changed, we now have more ability to quickly
and cheaply sequence cells and also understand the implications of genetic sequences. So now your
cells aren't waste products, they contain highly personal information.
And also commercialisation of cells. Producing cell lines and producing products research on cell
lines has become hugely profitable industry and when people started learning about this, then they
thought, well, why am I giving these away for free. There is the legal precedent: Moore v the Regents
of the University of California. A cell line was developed from cancer cells taken from Robert Moore
1

and he thought that he should get some of the profits of this. This was a pretty protracted legal case
in California, lots of appeals and things, but in 1990 it did finally come down to a legal ruling that
individuals aren’t entitled to financial compensation for their cells or things taken or things produced
from their cells. But now we do understand that by giving cells for research that could be profitable
for someone. So I think that has again changed our conception of them. They're no longer waste
products.
The next ethical issue I want to talk about involves ethnicity. It's a big question: how much impact,
what is the role of Henrietta Lacks’ ethnicity in the whole situation, her cells being taken and
developed into this line. And that'
the role of Henri313.19 123 f
without their informed cowithout their informed cor123 fwithout their informed co(c)123 f
developed into t

First one, first possibility, use alternatives. If this was a new cell line that had been developed in this
way, absolutely no one would use it. There are p