

## De-functioning loop ileostomy: creating more problems from solving one?

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ileostomy, but our study simply intended to highlight the creation of the de-functioning stoma in low anterior resection, increases various other stoma-related morbidity that should be factored into consideration. A potential short-term benefit of a routine de-functioning loop ileostomy needs to be balanced against potential long-term risks. Therefore, selective use of de-functioning loop ileostomy should only be considered in high-risk patients and when the overall leak and stoma closure-related mortality does not exceed 0.9%.<sup>19,20</sup> A joint discussion between the patient and surgeon with the complication risk of having an ileostomy in anterior resection should be encouraged to make an informed decision prior to the surgery.

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## The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks – Rebecca Skloot

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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is a fascinating and harrowing book which chronicles the life and death of Henrietta Lacks. Henrietta was a black woman, a descendent of slaves, who grew up working Virginia's tobacco fields, and who died in 1951 aged 31 from an aggressive form of cervical cancer. Leaving behind a husband and five young children who had been unaware of the palliative nature of her condition, Lacks died alone on a "coloured ward" in the John Hopkins Hospital, which in 1950s America was the only hospital offering medical treatment to the black community free of charge.

It was during her cancer treatment at the John Hopkins Hospital that samples of the tumour growing on her cervix were removed, without her knowledge or consent, and given to Dr George Gey for cancer research. Medical researchers had previously found it impossible to keep human cell lines alive, but the cancer cells taken from Henrietta thrived in the laboratory and grew at a rapid rate, creating the cell line which would be named HeLa. In developing the HeLa cell line, Gey and his team realised that they had cultured a research tool that could be widely distributed throughout America and the world, and in doing so, created a multibillion-dollar industry – making Henrietta, or at least her cells, immortal. Unbeknown to her family at the time, the HeLa cell line was being used to make huge medical breakthroughs, including in the development of the polio vaccine.

In a book that could very easily have simply become an analysis of the science behind cell culturing, and an account of the scientific and medical advances that were made using the HeLa cell line, Skoort never loses the people, and the person, behind the story. It is written in part as a novel, with the interviews that Skoort carried out with Henrietta's

family presented as dialogue. She sets the scene perfectly in each chapter, and at times the back stories of people who were closest to Henrietta do read almost like they could be characters from a work of fiction. Skoort has clearly invested time and energy into building relationships with the Lacks family, and evidently feels a responsibility to tell their story in their own words, which is evident in the tone that the book takes.

While the book predominantly focuses on the life of Henrietta, and the events surrounding her death and the culturing of the HeLa cell line, Skoort also investigates the treatment of Henrietta's eldest daughter, Elsie, who had been institutionalised in the Hospital for the Negro Insane in Crownsville, with the diagnosis of "idiocy". Skoort is persistent in her investigation into the treatment of Elsie, and other patients hospitalised during this time, and touches on the inequalities of the treatment of coloured patients in such institutions, and the history of medical experimentation on them. Skoort's motives behind this line of her investigation do in part appear to be a calculated method of further winning the trust of the Lacks family, but in doing so she does expose some of the more controversial medical practices of the time.

Skoort has seamlessly weaved the history of the Lacks family with scientific explanation, and in doing so tells us the story of a family whose name has become famous in science, with sensitivity and empathy. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks is a must read for those with an interest in medical ethics, and in the development of the technologies used in culturing cell lines. It is a memorable book that documents a story that needs to be told, and which challenges the reader to get to know, and care about, some of the people behind the science.