

research Gey was “most capable” of doing himself, and in some cases had already done, but not yet published. Pomerat replied:

With regard to your . . . disapproval for a wide exploration of the HeLa strain, I don't see how you can hope to inhibit progress in this direction since you released the strain so widely that it now can be purchased commercially. This is a little bit like requesting people not to work on the golden hamster! . . . I realize that it is the goodness of your heart that made available the HeLa cell and therefore why you now find that everybody wants to get into the act.

Pomerat suggested that Gey should have finished his own HeLa research before “releasing [HeLa] to the general public since once released it becomes general scientific property.”

But Gey hadn't done that. And as soon as HeLa became “general scientific property,” people started wondering about the woman behind the cells.

1920s · 1930s · 1940s · 1950s · 1960s · 1970s · 1980s · 1990s · 2000s

1953–1954

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Helen Lane

So many people knew Henrietta's name, someone was bound to leak it. Gey had told William Scherer and his adviser Jerome Syverton in Minneapolis, plus the people at the NFIP, who'd probably told the team at Tuskegee. Everyone in the Gey lab knew her name, as did Howard Jones, Richard Telinde, and the other Hopkins doctors who'd treated her.

Sure enough, on November 2, 1953, the *Minneapolis Star* became the first publication to name the woman behind the HeLa cells. There was just one thing—the reporter got her name wrong. HeLa, the story said, was “from a Baltimore woman named Henrietta Lakes.”

No one knows who leaked the near-correct version of Henrietta's name to the *Minneapolis Star*. Soon after the article ran, Gey got a letter from Jerome Syverton, saying, “I am writing to assure you that neither Bill nor I provided the [*Minneapolis Star*] with the name of the patient. As you know, Bill and I concur in your conviction that the cell strain should be referred to as HeLa and that the patient's name should not be used.”

Regardless, a name was out. And two days after it was published,

Roland H. Berg, a press officer at the NFIP, sent Gey a letter saying he planned to write a more detailed article about HeLa cells for a popular magazine. Berg was "intrigued with the scientific and human interest elements in such a story," he wrote, and he wanted to learn more about it.

Gey replied saying, "I have discussed the matter with Dr. Telinde, and he has agreed to allow this material to be presented in a popular magazine article. We must, however, withhold the name of the patient."

But Berg insisted:

Perhaps I should describe further to you my ideas on this article, especially in view of your statement that the name of the patient must be withheld. . . . To inform [the public] you must also interest them. . . . You do not engage the attention of the reader unless your story has basic human interest elements. And the story of the HeLa cells, from what little I know of it now, has all those elements. . . .

An intrinsic part of this story would be to describe how these cells, originally obtained from Henrietta Lakes, are being grown and used for the benefit of mankind. . . . In a story such as this, the name of the individual is intrinsic. As a matter of fact, if I were to proceed with the task my plan would be to interview the relatives of Mrs. Lakes. Nor would I publish the story without the full cooperation and approval of Mrs. Lakes' family. Incidentally, you may not be aware, but the identity of the patient is already a matter of public record inasmuch as newspaper reports have completely identified the individual. For example, I can refer you to the story in the *Minneapolis Star*, dated November 2, 1953.

I am entirely sympathetic to your reasons for withholding the name of the patient and thus prevent a possible invasion of privacy. However, I do believe that in the

kind of article I am projecting there would be complete protection of the rights of all individuals.

Berg didn't explain how releasing Henrietta's name to the public would have protected the privacy or rights of her family. In fact, doing so would have forever connected Henrietta and her family with the cells and any medical information eventually derived from their DNA. That wouldn't have protected the Lackses' privacy, but it certainly would have changed the course of their lives. They would have learned that Henrietta's cells were still alive, that they'd been taken, bought, sold, and used in research without her knowledge or theirs.

Gey forwarded the letter to Telinde and others at Hopkins, including the head of public relations, asking how they thought he should respond.

"I see no reason why an interesting story cannot be made of it without using her name," Telinde replied. "Since there is no reason for doing it I can see no point in running the risk of getting into trouble by disclosing it."

Telinde didn't say what "trouble" he worried they might get into by releasing Henrietta's name. Keeping patient information confidential was emerging as a standard practice, but it wasn't law, so releasing it wasn't out of the question. In fact, he wrote Gey, "If you seriously disagree with me in this, I will be glad to talk to you."

Gey wrote to Berg saying, "An interesting story could still be built around a fictitious name." But he wasn't entirely opposed to releasing her real name. "There may still be a chance for you to win your point," he wrote. "I fully realize the importance of basic human interest elements in a story such as this and would propose therefore that you drop down to see Dr. Telinde and myself."

Gey never told Berg that the *Minneapolis Star* article had Henrietta's name wrong, and Berg never wrote his article. But the press wasn't going away. A few months later, a reporter from *Collier's* magazine by the name of Bill Davidson contacted Gey—he was planning to write a story identical to the one Berg had proposed. This time Gey



took a harder stance, perhaps because Davidson wasn't affiliated with one of Gey's major funding organizations, as Berg was. Gey agreed to be interviewed under two conditions: that he be allowed to read and approve the final article, and that the magazine not include the personal story or full name of the patient the cells came from.

The editor of the story balked. Like Berg, she wrote that "the human story behind these cells would be of great interest to the public." But Gey wouldn't budge. If she wanted him or any of his colleagues to talk with Davidson, *Collier's* would have to publish the article without the patient's name.

The editor eventually agreed, and on May 14, 1954, *Collier's* published a story about the power and promise of tissue culture. Watching HeLa cells divide on a screen, Davidson wrote, "was like a glimpse at immortality." Because of cell culture, he said, the world was "on the threshold of a hopeful new era in which cancer, mental illness and, in fact, nearly all diseases now regarded as incurable will cease to torment man." And much of that was thanks to cells from one woman, "an unsung heroine of medicine." The story said her name was Helen L., "a young woman in her thirties when she was admitted to the Johns Hopkins Hospital with an incurable cancer of the cervix." It also said Gey had grown Helen L.'s cells from a sample taken *after* her death, not before.

There's no record of where those two pieces of misinformation came from, but it's safe to assume they came from within the walls of Hopkins. As agreed, the *Collier's* editor had sent the story to Gey before publication for review. One week later she got a corrected version back from Joseph Kelly, the head of public relations at Hopkins. Kelly had rewritten the article, presumably with Gey's help, correcting several scientific errors but leaving two inaccuracies: the timing of growing the cells and the name Helen L.

Decades later, when a reporter for *Rolling Stone* asked Margaret Gey where the name Helen Lane came from, she'd say, "Oh, I don't know. It was confused by a publisher in Minneapolis. The name wasn't supposed to be revealed at all. It was just that somebody got confused."

One of Gey's colleagues told me that Gey created the pseudonym to throw journalists off the trail of Henrietta's real identity. If so, it worked. From the moment the *Collier's* article appeared until the seventies, the woman behind the HeLa cells would be known most often as Helen Lane, and sometimes as Helen Larson, but never as Henrietta Lacks. And because of that, her family had no idea her cells were alive.