

Legislation Text

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Remembering Henrietta Lacks and honoring her contribution to modern medicine, including the development of COVID-19 vaccines.

WHEREAS, In 1951, a 31 year-old mother of five named Henrietta Lacks visited The Johns Hopkins Hospital complaining of vaginal bleeding. Upon examination, renowned gynecologist Dr. Howard Jones discovered a large, malignant tumor on her cervix. At the time, The Johns Hopkins Hospital was one of only a few hospitals that treated poor African Americans; and

WHEREAS, As medical records show, Mrs. Lacks began undergoing radium treatments for her cervical cancer. This was the best medical treatment available at the time for this terrible disease. Unfortunately, her cancer was too advanced and aggressive, and she passed away on October 4, 1951; and

WHEREAS, During her treatment, a sample of her cancer cells retrieved during a biopsy were sent to Dr. George Gey's nearby tissue lab. For years, Dr. Gey, a prominent cancer and virus researcher, had been collecting cells from all patients who came to The Johns Hopkins Hospital with cervical cancer, but each sample quickly died in Dr. Gey's lab. What he would soon discover was that Mrs. Lacks' cells were unlike any of the others he had ever seen: where other cells would die, Mrs. Lacks' cells doubled every 20 to 24 hours; and

WHEREAS, When the cells were given to Dr. Gey, this was done without Mrs. Lacks' knowledge or consent, illustrating the racial inequities that were, and still are, embedded in the U.S. research and healthcare systems; and

WHEREAS, In the laboratory, Mrs. Lacks' cells turned out to have an extraordinary capacity to survive and reproduce; they were, in essence, immortal. These incredible cells - nicknamed "HeLa" cells, from the first two letters of her first and last names - became the first living human cell line. Dr. Gey shared the cells widely with other scientists, and they became a workhorse of biological research. They have been used to study the human genome, to observe how cells grow and divide, and to understand how viruses function; and

WHEREAS, The cells were used to test the effects of toxins, poisons, drugs, and radiation to remove the need for human trials. During the first space mission, Lacks' cells were onboard to demonstrate how human cells would react to the pressure in space. Most importantly, her cells were used to create vaccines and even cures for diseases such as influenza, Parkinson's disease, and leukemia. Polio's near eradication can also be credited to her contribution; and

WHEREAS, HeLa cells are now a staple in scientific research, and have been included in over 76,000 studies. Today, her contribution is more significant and urgent than ever, as her cells have once again been used to fight a deadly virus, COVID-19. Multiple breakthroughs in developing the COVID-19 vaccines happened because of HeLa cells; and

WHEREAS, The COVID-19 pandemic, along with this summer's civil unrest, brought to the forefront the injustices faced by individuals and communities of color. Some scientists have called for a reduction in the use

of HeLa cells in research, or even an end to their use entirely, arguing that the cells were obtained without Lacks' knowledge or consent (even though this was legal at the time), so any use of them is unethical and perpetuates an injustice; and

WHEREAS, As detailed in a September 2020 *Nature* article, many members of the Lacks family do not want scientists to stop using her cells. Instead, many of her descendants are leading a new effort, #HELA100, that calls for people to celebrate her life and legacy. There also needs to be important discussions and decisions made regarding the future use of biological specimens, even if they are "deidentified" from the person they came from. Equally important, there have been some efforts to financially compensate Lacks' descendants and family members of others whose bodies have been used without consent for research; and

WHEREAS, These are important, and necessary, steps that must occur in order to acknowledge and undo the disparities that are baked into scientific research. As the *Nature* article states, "COVID-19, a disease that is disproportionately affecting Black people in a number of countries, offers an opportunity for those who wish to usher in a fairer era of research. To give back now, researchers should not only study why the disease is more prevalent and severe among Black people, but also help to implement solutions to close the gap. And, once a vaccine is available - possibly as a result of work with HeLa cells - researchers must work with marginalized communities to see that it reaches those who need it most. The fact that Lacks' cells were taken in a different era of consent will never justify what happened. The past cannot be undone, but we must acknowledge the wrongs of previous generations, and those wrongs that persist today. Justice must be done, and the time to start is now"; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That we hereby remember Henrietta Lacks and honor her contribution to modern medicine, including the development of COVID-19 vaccines.