MATILDA EFFECT

Pionierinnen der Forschung

Female Pioneers of Research

Pt. 45
Henrietta Lacks

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Henrietta Lacks (1920-1951)

Unwitting donor of the first immortalized human cells

As the great-granddaughter of a white slave owner, she was raised by her grandparents after her mother’s death, where she had to work on their farm.
At the same time, however, she was able to attend school for six years.

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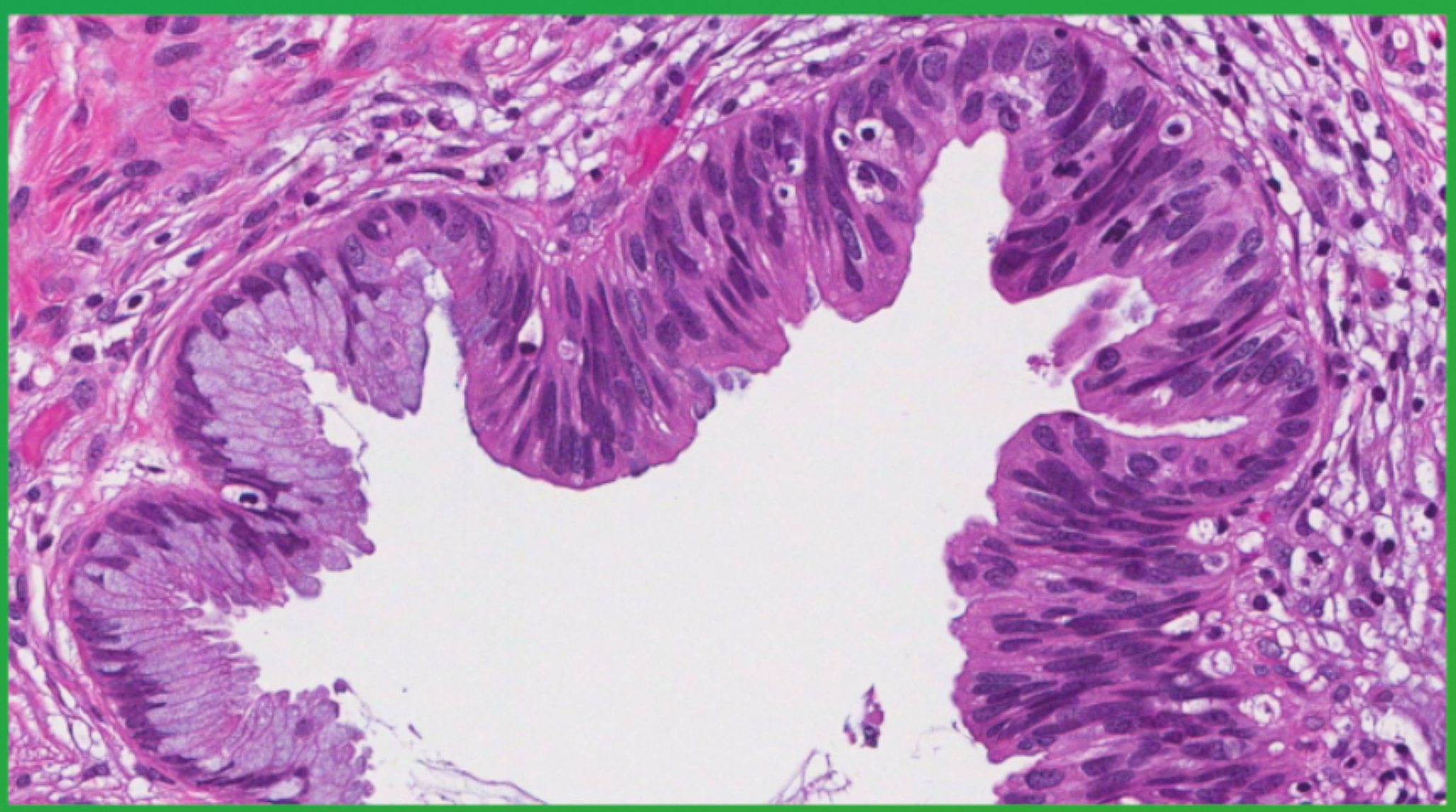
In 1951, she was admitted to *Johns Hopkins Hospital* in Baltimore, one of the few hospitals at the time that treated African Americans. There, a tumor on her cervix was discovered, which turned out to be an adenocarcinoma.



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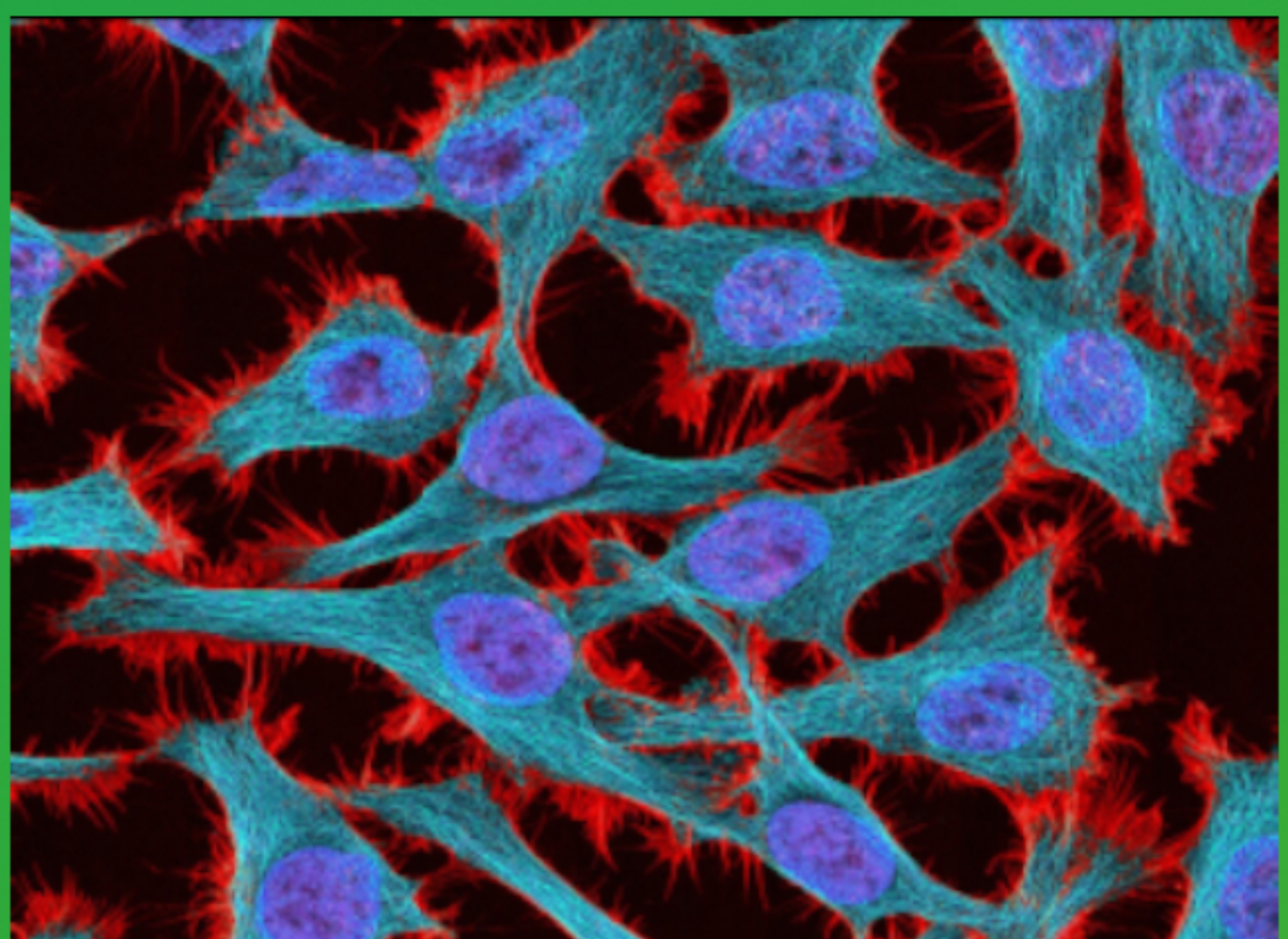
During one of the treatments for her carcinoma, tissue samples were taken without her knowledge. Up to that point, scientists had only succeeded in establishing immortal cell lines from animal cells — that is, cell cultures capable of dividing indefinitely. However, one of the cells from the samples taken from Lacks turned out to be immortal, dividing at an immense rate and in large numbers. They were named *HeLa cells*.



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Neither Lacks herself nor her family had consented to the removal of her cells, which, however, was not uncommon at the time. When the family asked for an explanation, they were handed a cell biology textbook, in which they were told they would find the answer. The use of *HeLa cells* generated millions in annual revenue, while her relatives lived in poverty. The publication of the genome sequence sparked a debate about ethics in scientific research.

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Henrietta Lacks starb im Oktober 1951 an der Krebserkrankung. *HeLa-Zellen* werden in der Forschung immer noch genutzt, ihre Familie erhielt 2013 die Kontrollrechte für die Nutzung.
Sie selbst wurde mit Stiftungen und Ehrungen gewürdigt.

Henrietta Lacks died in October 1951 from cancer. *HeLa cells* are still used in research today, and her family was granted control rights over their use in 2013. She herself has been honored with foundations and awards.

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