

Family of Henrietta Lacks hires civil rights attorney to seek funds over famous cells

By Tim Prudente

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BALTIMORE — The family of Henrietta Lacks has hired a prominent civil rights attorney, who says he plans to seek compensation for them from big pharmaceutical companies across the country that made fortunes off medical research with her famous cancer cells.

An attorney for the Lacks family said a legal team is investigating lawsuits against as many as 100 defendants, mostly pharmaceutical companies, but they haven't ruled out a case against the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

A Hopkins doctor collected a sample of cancer cells from the young mother without her knowledge or permission nearly 70 years ago. Those cells — the first to live outside the body in a glass tube — brought decades of medical advances. Her cells later became the most widely used human cells in scientific research.

Dubbed the “HeLa” cells, they have been used to develop everything from coronavirus vaccines to sunscreen, attorney Ben Crump said. Vaccines, cancer treatments and in vitro fertilization are among the many medical techniques derived from her cells. Crump said it's an example of the long and troubling history of the medical exploitation of Black people in America.

“Never was that more apparent than with the tragedy of how they exploited Henrietta Lacks,” he said.

Crump, who represented the families of George Floyd, Michael Brown and other Black men killed by police, appeared Thursday at Greater Faith Baptist Church in North Baltimore with some of Lacks's descendants, ranging from her 86-year-old oldest son to great-grandchildren.

Individual family members have talked publicly for years about pursuing legal action against Hopkins and other institutions that used her cells. On Thursday, for the first time, more than a dozen family members stood united in that effort behind one of the country's leading civil rights attorneys.

In addition to Crump, the family is represented by the New York-based trial lawyer Christopher Seeger, who helped win billion-dollar settlements against such companies as Volkswagen and the producer of the painkiller Vioxx. Seeger said the team plans to file the first lawsuits Oct. 4, the day Lacks died 70 years ago.

“This is the greatest example of corporate theft I've seen in my career, and I've been pursuing pharmaceutical companies for 25 years,” Seeger said. “They took something from this family and have offered them nothing, yet they've gone out and made millions of dollars.”

The news conference signals a shift in strategy as Lacks's family seeks to collect from pharmaceutical companies, though neither Crump nor Seeger would name a specific company they might sue on behalf of the Lacks family.

Lawrence Lacks, her eldest son, said in a 2017 interview that he intended to sue the Johns Hopkins University. But Hopkins officials have long contended the institution never patented her cell line and therefore doesn't own the rights to it and never profited.

Hopkins officials have noted that when her cells were taken there was no established practice for informing or obtaining consent from donors, nor were there regulations on the use of cells in research.

In response to the news conference, a Hopkins spokeswoman directed questions to a page on the Hopkins website titled "[Honoring Henrietta: The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks.](#)"

Lacks's story won national attention after Rebecca Skloot wrote a bestseller, "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," which was made into an HBO movie with Oprah Winfrey four years ago.

In its effort to honor Lacks's contributions to clinical research and health, Johns Hopkins has worked with some of her family members to develop programs, including scholarships and engagement with local schools. It's also naming a building on Hopkins medical campus in East Baltimore after her.

Some of Lacks's descendants, however, said her memory has been smeared over the years by myriad false claims, including suggestions that she was illiterate and signed her name with an "X." They spoke of not only "reparations" for the taking of her cells but reclaiming the story of their mother and grandmother.

"At what point does a person's property and cells belong to them?" said Alan Wilks, one of her grandsons.

Wilks and his relatives wore red face masks with her picture and buttons with her name at Thursday's event. Inside the church, when Crump called out, they shouted back in unison.

"Say her name!" "Henrietta Lacks!" "Say her name!" "Henrietta Lacks!"

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