

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Ohio Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is CJ Alexander, I am a biotechnology student at the Delaware Area Career Center, and I am here in support of Senate Bill 111.

Senators, I come before you today to speak about righting a wrong and honoring one woman, who without her consent, changed medicine forever. In 1951, Henrietta Lacks was a 31 year old mother of 5 and a patient at John Hopkins Hospital where she was being treated for an incredibly aggressive form of cervical cancer, which would take her life only a few months after being diagnosed. During her original screening, a small piece of cervical tissue was taken for testing. This is standard for patients who are believed to have cancer, however what followed with this tissue sample was anything but. This tissue was given to a research lab after testing without patient knowledge. The cells from this sample were turned into “immortal cells” or cells that can rapidly reproduce and stay stable for research. Her cells are regarded as the first immortal human cells, and were shared all across the scientific community. They became known as “HeLa” cells.

HeLa cells have been used to create a variety of medical advancements from the Covid-19 vaccine to improved cancer treatments.

While these advancements are amazing, the way they were acquired is a mark on the face of modern medicine. The issue is the lack of informed patient consent. As a patient, you are entitled to decide what is done with your body and any portions of that may be taken, including if it is donated to research or not. By not telling Lacks that her cells were being donated, our medical system failed her and allowed her body to be used without her consent and without crediting her, causing her to lose any possible recognition or compensation that could have come from the advancements made.

We are all aware not all medical knowledge comes from willing sources. Human experimentation performed during world wars gave us vital information about the extremes of the human body and its susceptibility to diseases. Live dissections taught us how organ systems interact with each other. Even our most basic understanding of anatomy came from robbing graves. We can all look back at this and understand that the means in which we made these discoveries were often upsetting, but the knowledge is life altering for millions.

Creating Henrietta Lacks day as an official state-recognized day would open the conversation to acknowledging the failure of medical professionals and scientists to inform Henrietta Lacks of what was being done with her tissue sample. This would facilitate more dialogue surrounding patient consent in the ever-changing medical field, and recognizing those who give their bodies to science and how we can best respect them from a medical ethics perspective. By starting this discussion, we can start to honor the unknowing sacrifice made by one incredible woman, and

the possible hundreds of other people whose bodies may have also been used to bring us to where we are today. Thank you.