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HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 470
AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE
(Proposed by the Senate Committee on Rules
on February 10, 2023)
(Patron Prior to Substitute--Delegate Ward)

Designating October 4, in 2023 and in each succeeding year, as Henrietta Lacks Day in Virginia.

WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks, a native of Roanoke, unknowingly played a consequential role in the history of medical science as the source of the immortal HeLa line of cancer cells that have been used in critical research and the development of lifesaving treatments for decades; and

WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks was born Loretta Pleasant on August 1, 1920, in Roanoke, and was raised by her grandfather on a tobacco farm in Clover, where their ancestors had worked as slaves; and

WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks married her husband, David, in Halifax County in 1941, and the couple ultimately settled in the Turner Station area of what was then Baltimore County, Maryland, and which was one of the oldest and largest Black communities in the region at the time; and

WHEREAS, in January 1951, a few months after giving birth to her fifth child, Henrietta Lacks had a severe hemorrhage and sought treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital, the only medical facility in the area that accepted Black patients; she learned that she had a large, malignant cervical tumor that was growing at an accelerated rate; and

WHEREAS, although radiation treatments initially appeared to be effective, the tumor was growing faster than the radiation could treat it, and Henrietta Lacks succumbed to cervical cancer on October 4, 1951, at the age of 31; she was buried in an unmarked grave in a family cemetery in Clover; and

WHEREAS, unbeknownst to her and her family, doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital had taken samples of Henrietta Lacks's tumor during her treatment without her permission, a common practice in that era; and

26 WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks's cells were cultured by Dr. George Gey, who for decades had
27 unsuccessfully attempted to grow cancer cells outside of the human body without success; Henrietta
28 Lacks's cells doubled every 24 hours and would divide and replenish themselves indefinitely, creating an
29 immortal line of cells to be used for research, enabling researchers to conduct research without
30 experimenting on humans; and

31 WHEREAS, this breakthrough provided Dr. Gey and other researchers with a strand of cancer
32 cells, named "HeLa" for Henrietta Lacks, that survived outside of the human body for far longer than
33 previously recorded; HeLa cells were the first human cells successfully cloned in 1955; the cells were
34 distributed freely around the world to researchers who requested them, and millions of tons of the cells
35 have been grown over the past 70 years; and

36 WHEREAS, HeLa cells were used to gauge the effects of radiation on human cells, research that
37 led to the development of an HPV vaccine and helped to explain why Henrietta Lacks's cancer was so
38 aggressive and resistant to radiation treatments; and

39 WHEREAS, HeLa cells have traveled in space, advanced medical research in fertility and genetics,
40 expanded the understanding and treatment of cancer and AIDS, contributed to the invention of the first
41 effective polio vaccine by Jonas Salk, and played a crucial role in the development of the COVID-19
42 vaccines; and

43 WHEREAS, the story of Henrietta Lacks is simultaneously fascinating and heartbreaking; what
44 has been achieved through the use of HeLa cells is remarkable and cannot be understated; however, the
45 cells were obtained without her knowledge or consent and without compensation paid to her or her family;
46 and

47 WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks's children learned the details of her medical records not from Johns
48 Hopkins Hospital but from Bobbette Lacks, the wife of Henrietta's oldest son, Lawrence, who uncovered
49 the truth by chance; and

50 WHEREAS, Bobbette Lacks was having lunch with a friend, who was a medical researcher, and
51 after recognizing the Lacks name, the medical researcher explained to Bobbette that he and other scientists
52 had been working with HeLa cells for years; and

53 WHEREAS, for decades, Henrietta Lacks's children had been kept in the dark about their mother's
54 legacy after she visited Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951, and since Bobbette Lacks learned the truth, they
55 have worked diligently to publicize their mother's role in this pivotal chapter of medical history; and

56 WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks Day provides an opportunity for Virginians to gain a better
57 understanding of the study and use of HeLa cells, support cancer research, and provide help and hope to
58 people with cancer and their families, as well as learn more about patient confidentiality and patients'
59 rights in the health care field; now, therefore, be it

60 RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the General Assembly
61 designate October 4, in 2023 and in each succeeding year, as Henrietta Lacks Day in Virginia; and, be it

62 RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates transmit a copy of this
63 resolution to surviving descendants of Henrietta Lacks so that they may be apprised of the sense of the
64 General Assembly of Virginia in this matter; and, be it

65 RESOLVED FINALLY, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates post the designation of this day
66 on the General Assembly's website.

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