During this Black History Month, and as we press on through a pandemic that has had a disproportionate impact on minority communities, I urge you to consider the contributions of Dr. Henrietta Lacks to medicine.

In 1951, Lacks died in a hospital room from cervical cancer. While a patient at Johns Hopkins Hospital, doctors removed cells from a tumor. They didn’t ask her permission, and they didn’t inform her of the implications of their actions.

Today, the HeLa cell line has contributed to many medical breakthroughs, from research on the molecular basis of cancer to experiments that help us understand the coronavirus. Lacks’ cells have been used in the development of vaccines for polio, hepatitis B, and COVID-19. They’ve also helped in the development of new cancer treatments and the study of how the body responds to radiation.

Lacks’ cells have been so useful because they grow easily in culture. They multiply quickly, and they can adapt to different environments. But they didn’t come easy. Lacks was avaged, and she died young. Her cells have been a gift to medicine, and they have helped to save, perhaps, millions of lives.

Lacks’ legacy is a reminder of the value of diversity in science. Her cells have been used in the research of many different conditions, and they have helped to advance our understanding of health and disease. They have also been used to develop new treatments for cancer and other diseases.

But Lacks’ story is not just a story of scientific progress. It is also a story of unfairness. Lacks’ cells have been used without her consent, and they have been used to make money for laboratories and pharmaceutical companies. This is a story of exploitation, and it is a story of systemic racism.

As we continue to fight against COVID-19, we must remember Lacks’ story. We must remember that the contributions of people of color to medicine have been ignored and undervalued. We must also remember that the benefits of medical research have not been equally distributed.

We must do better. We must ensure that the contributions of everyone are recognized and valued. We must ensure that the benefits of medical research are shared equitably. And we must ensure that justice is done to Dr. Henrietta Lacks and all those whose cells have been used without their consent.

I urge you to consider Lacks’ story as we continue our work to combat COVID-19. I urge you to remember the value of diversity in science and the importance of equity in research. I urge you to do everything in your power to ensure that justice is done to all who have contributed to the progress of medicine.