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Henrietta Lacks Foundation Receives Two Historic Gifts

Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Francis Collins donate to the Foundation

October 28, 2020, Portland, Oregon - [The Henrietta Lacks Foundation](#) (Foundation) is pleased to announce that the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), the largest private, nonprofit biomedical research institution in the United States, has made a six figure gift to support the Foundation, which provides grants to members of the Lacks family and other eligible grantees. In addition, geneticist and physician Francis Collins, MD PhD, Director of the National Institutes of Health, has donated a portion of his 2020 Templeton Prize award to the Foundation. These two gifts build on the momentum created earlier this year when Abcam became the first-ever biotech company to donate to the Foundation.

The Henrietta Lacks Foundation provides financial assistance to individuals and families — particularly within minority communities — who were involved in historic research without their knowledge, consent, or benefit. This includes the cases of Henrietta Lacks and HeLa cells, the Tuskegee Syphilis Studies, and The Human Radiation Experiments, among others. The Foundation offers those who have benefited from such research — including scientists, universities, corporations, and the general public — a way to address its impact on subjects, their families, and their communities.

HHMI scientists make discoveries that advance human health and our fundamental understanding of biology. The Institute also invests in transforming science education into a creative, inclusive endeavor that reflects the excitement of research. HHMI President Erin O’Shea commented: “Scientists at HHMI and across the life sciences have made breakthroughs using HeLa cells, and we want to recognize the great benefit to science that Henrietta Lacks made possible. In the wake of recent, highly visible racist events, HHMI’s community has come together to set new goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion. One of our scientists, Investigator Samara Reck-Peterson at the University of California, San Diego, brought us this opportunity to support the Henrietta Lacks Foundation.” The Reck-Peterson lab has independently [pledged to support the foundation](#).

Francis Collins began [working closely with the Lacks Family](#) in 2013, when the genome of the HeLa cells was [sequenced and released publicly](#) without the family’s consent. Together Collins, the NIH, and the Lacks Family formed [The HeLa Genome Data Access Working Group](#) to ensure that future research using the HeLa genome is conducted with the family’s consent, and in a way that protects their genetic privacy. Collins and his wife Diane Baker, MS, commented: “Getting to know the Lacks family and having the opportunity in some small way to address the harms done to them over almost 70 years has been a profound experience. If this small donation can help to carry on the family’s dreams, that will make us very happy.”

Many of Henrietta Lacks’ great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren are now college-aged, or will be soon, and are interested in pursuing higher education. These gifts will help support those goals, and others. The Foundation was established in 2010 with proceeds from the acclaimed book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, and the HBO film adaptation of the book, starring Oprah Winfrey. Almost every day, readers moved by Henrietta Lacks’ story have made individual donations to the Foundation, but HHMI’s donation is the first gift from a research institution.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

THE HENRIETTA LACKS FOUNDATION

The Henrietta Lacks Foundation provides financial assistance to individuals in need, and their families, who have made important contributions to scientific research without their knowledge or informed consent. The Foundation offers those who have benefited from those contributions — including scientists, universities, corporations, and the general public — a way to address the lingering impact of research practices on such research subjects and their families. Further information about the Foundation can be found here: <http://henrietalacksfoundation.org/>

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