

ChengChat by Mark Sandford



Wikidemia.

The other day I was listening to the news on the radio when the reporter mentioned the use of “Hela” cells in recent scientific research and mentioned that there was some kind of controversy about them. Having no idea what Hela cells are, I wanted to find a quick overview of why they were important and what the controversy was.

Scopus, one of the Library’s science databases, returns just over 80,000 hits on a search for “Hela cells,” nearly all with titles I don’t understand. That is hardly a surprise, since articles in databases like *Scopus* are written for experts—people who already know what Hela cells are and are already aware of the issues that surround them. For a capstone project in biology, *Scopus* would be invaluable, but for a simple Librarian, *Wikipedia* just might do.

The first paragraph of *Wikipedia*’s entry on Hela cells (or HeLa cells, it turns out), explained that they are a line of human cells that can be indefinitely reproduced in scientific labs and are used in various kinds of research. They are named for the woman they came from: Henrietta Lacks. The second paragraph explained one of the controversies surrounding their use: Ms. Lacks never agreed to have her cells used for research. The cells were cancerous, which accounts for their being “immortal” or able to reproduce indefinitely in the correct environment. I also learned that at that time (and even today) it is neither required nor common for researchers to ask for a patient’s permission to use any tissue removed as a part of a surgical process. They are considered medical waste and no longer the property of the person they came from. There is also another issue—the cells are unusually good at cross-contaminating other cell lines in the same laboratory, which interferes with biological research.

There is more on *Wikipedia* about the HeLa cells, but my curiosity was satisfied. And if I were a student writing a paper, I would now have enough context to begin researching their use in laboratories. For controversial topics, some articles are more biased than others. But knowing what the controversies are can help you narrow down your topic if you find yourself overwhelmed. For HeLa cells, I might have begun with just the idea of their use in research as a topic, but with *Wikipedia's* help, I can narrow down my paper to the concerns of cross-contamination in labs.

Bottom line:

- ✓ It's OK to start with *Wikipedia*.
- ✓ Use it for background information only.
- ✓ Some of the articles are better than others (it's usually obvious). Be critical.
- ✓ It's impossible to determine the authority. You don't know who contributed to the article or what their expertise is.
- ✓ Check out the external links and references. Are they helpful? Do they still work?
- ✓ Don't cite it for your research paper unless your professor says it's OK.