

Donating bone marrow easier than expected

Fears give way to a simple, painless procedure with benefits for family

Dr. Stanley Marcus, Times Colonist

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I read with interest your touching article regarding Dan Twinn, who needs a bone-marrow transplant to help him get through his serious health issues.

Having recently been the "lucky one" to be a bone-marrow donor for my brother, who is battling leukemia, I cannot emphasize enough the great need and also the amazing ease of being a donor.

One year ago, I lost a very good friend to leukemia, because a bone-marrow donor could not be found when he needed one most. So when I found out that I would need to be tested as a possible donor for my brother, I did not hesitate to agree.

But I did have some reservations as to how the process would affect me. What would I be called upon to do? How much time would this entail? Was it going to hurt? As a chiropractor, and being in the health-care profession for 23 years, I assumed I knew all I needed to know about leukemia and cancers. But being a bone-marrow donor was definitely not in my "scope of practice." But duty called and I started reading, Googling and trying to accumulate as much information. There's not much out there for the donor who is uncertain about what to expect.

Most of the public, when they hear bone-marrow donation, envision being anesthetized and having some large, sharp instrument shoved into their pelvic bones to remove huge hunks of bone marrow. Pretty scary.

Now, let me tell what I actually experienced.

The first process in bone-marrow donation (actually, now being called stem cell transplant) is having a simple blood sample taken. If you are fortunate enough, you will be a match for one of the many cancer victims in need of a transplant.

Upon being told I was a donor match for my brother, I felt truly blessed. And I can't tell you how ecstatic my brother and his family felt. (To a cancer victim, finding a donor is life-saving news.) I was then contacted by the local hospital to come in for an interview where they provide all necessary details. In my case, my brother lives in Toronto, so I was asked to fly there and stay for a week and undergo the procedure.

To my delight, the procedure is not what the public envisions. Instead, it has become very simple.

I was given a drug that needed to be self-injected for four days. This drug causes the stem cells to move from bone marrow and circulate through my blood. It is easy to inject and the possible side effects are minor -- possible headaches, fatigue and flu symptoms. Seems

like a small price for such a huge result. And luckily, I experienced none of these symptoms.

On day five, I went to the hospital where I sat in a very comfortable lounge chair. I was hooked up to a blood-filtering machine, much like a dialysis unit, and my stem cells were filtered from my blood. Very simple and painless.

After a few hours, the hospital has a small bag of stem cells for some fortunate cancer victim. The donated blood is then analyzed to ensure that enough stem cells have been donated. In my case, we produced more than necessary.

This was huge.

Don't you love the look you see on a child's face when they get that perfect birthday gift? Well, imagine the unbelievable feeling that you experience when you find out that your blood-marrow donation will save someone's life.

It was one of the most emotional experiences of my life. There was a lot of hugging and tears.

And it was totally easy.

I encourage everyone to put their names on the potential donor list. It will only take a few minutes of your time. I truly feel blessed and know that you would feel the same way.

Dr. Stanley Marcus is a Victoria chiro- practor.