

Stranger's gift of bone marrow saves a child's life

Jeff Bell, Times Colonist Monday, January 07, 2008

David Charlebois has told the story many times, but his eyes still well up before he gets too far into the details.

Five years ago, the 46-year-old Victoria investment adviser became a bone-marrow donor.

He didn't know it at the time, but his marrow would be transplanted into one-year-old Sarah Byrne of Guelph, Ont., a child with a rare blood disorder known as MPS-1 or Hurler syndrome -- a condition that affects the ability of cells to get rid of waste material. His marrow was extracted on June 12, 2002, and was flown across the country for her to receive it the next day, which also happened to be his birthday.

For Sarah, it was crucial that her transplant come around the time she was a year old.

"They don't know why, they just know it gives the greatest chances of success," said Charlebois.

A longtime blood donor, Charlebois entered his name on the marrow-donor registry several years ago when he saw a display as he left a blood clinic.

"I knew nothing about it. The Internet didn't exist in those days, so I just read the material and signed up."

After a while, he was contacted as a possible match for donation but ended up being rejected. Then came the 2002 call that ended up with his marrow turning out to an almost-perfect match for Sarah.



David Charlebois of Victoria looks over a photo album charting the recovery of one-year-old Sarah Byrne of Guelph, Ont. Charlebois, a longtime blood donor, also signed up for the bone-marrow registry. His marrow was transplanted into Sarah, who is now recovering from a rare blood disorder known as MPS-1 or Hurler syndrome.

"I knew nothing about her or her situation until the confidentiality period expired in 2004," Charlebois said.

But once he and the Byrne family decided to exchange contact information, a special bond was created. One of Charlebois' prized possessions is a photo album of Sarah's road to health.

He first visited the family while on a business trip to Toronto, meeting with them at a conference held by the Canadian MPS Society. He hadn't expected to be able to catch up with them, and the encounter turned out to be a special one.

"It's a moment I'll treasure forever," he said.

Sarah's mother Judy burst into tears when they met, and had to assure Sarah that everything was OK.

"She said 'It's fine, they're tears of joy.' "

The red photo album that documents Sarah's time in the hospital, meetings with Charlebois and other indelible moments never fails to give inspiration.

One picture even shows the Byrne family praying over the container of Charlebois' marrow before it is given to their daughter.

"I can be having the worst day, and all I have to do is look at this and everything's all right," Charlebois said.

As for any pain from the marrow extraction, he said it was minor.

"You know what, go through this photo album, look what this family went through and what this girl went through."

Sarah has also endured extensive procedures beyond the transplant, Charlebois said.

"She's doing great now, she's in Grade 1. She's got some challenges ahead of her, but the doctors are thrilled with how well she's doing."

Since establishing a connection with Sarah and her family, Charlebois has been giving his time as a speaker about the merits of blood donation and the bone-marrow registry.

"He's quite an advocate," said Catherine Sloat of Canadian Blood Services, which runs the bone-marrow registry. "He's very willing to tell his story."

For his part, Charlebois said he just gets up in front of people and lets them know about his experiences. He also shows them his photo album.

"I've said to Blood Services if there's anything that I can do to promote the cause, I'll do it."

He has spoken at government offices to promote blood drives, and more recently has been at Claremont Secondary School addressing both staff and students.

"There's a teacher at Claremont, Jim Spoor, who's very active in terms of encouraging kids at a young age to get involved in donating blood," Charlebois said. "You can donate when you're 17, and he's encouraging the kids to donate blood. He's also encouraging them to put their name on the bone-marrow registry.

"That's how I got started, I started donating blood when I was in high school."

He has gone on to pass the century mark in blood donations, and is now at 106.

Charlebois said the feeling of having helped Sarah is amazing. As the father of a healthy 12-year-old son, he said he can't imagine what a family of a child needing a bone-marrow transplant would feel.

"You're totally dependent on someone else, you have no idea where they might be and there are no guarantees you're going to find a match."