

A perfect match?

The demand for bone marrow donations far outstrips the supply, which is why organizers of a Yorkville donor drive hoped to raise awareness

March 12, 2008

Garrick Gillette sits down with his wife, Debbie, in a room full of people. A nurse stops by their table, explains the process they're about to embark on, then leaves them with a smile. Next, they pop cotton swabs into their mouths, gather a bit of their own saliva and package it with their applications.

The sealed envelope, along with an \$80 check per person, is the first step needed to save the life of Sherry Kellogg Lamb, a 63-year-old grandmother of 12 who needs a bone marrow transplant.



Paul Houtz and his son Jack, 3, came out to support the bone marrow donor drive held Sunday for Sherry Kellogg Lamb at Cross Evangelical Church and School in Yorkville. donnell collins/special to the beacon news

How to help

For more information visit marrow.org or call (800) MARROW-2 or contact Calvin Pearce of LifeSource at (847) 226-4829.

In addition, a bone marrow donor drive will be held for Kim Urquizu, who has been diagnosed with acute monocytic leukemia, from 3:15 to 8 p.m. Thursday at Elburn and Countryside Community Center, 525 N. Main St. Call (630) 404-5059 or visit www.marrow.org.

"I got an e-mail from Sherry's son, and that was all it took," Garrick Gillette said. "I knew we'd be here."

The Gillettes weren't alone. More than 100 area residents joined the Gillettes on Sunday at Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church in Yorkville to participate in the church's first-ever bone marrow drive. Diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia last September, Lamb

recently spent nearly two months in the hospital undergoing two rounds of chemotherapy. She also agreed to participate in an experimental drug treatment, the results of which have been remarkable.

"It's a miracle that she's in remission now," said Lamb's brother, John Kellogg, of Yorkville. "It's very rare that that happens."

But it's also true that Lamb, of Somonauk, will eventually die without a bone marrow transplant. And finding a match is no easy task.

According to Calvin Pearce, bone marrow representative with LifeSource, the United States is woefully short of bone marrow donors, with less than 7 million Americans listed on the National Marrow Donor Program. Meanwhile, there are more than 70 diseases treatable by marrow transplantation including leukemia and other cancers, metabolic and immune system disorders as well as several forms of anemia.

"Every day more than 6,000 doctors look for donors for their patients," Pearce said. "Many of them will die before a donor will ever be found."

Bone marrow is a blood-like substance found inside major bones. It contains blood stem cells, which Pearce described as "baby blood cells." These immature blood cells grow into red blood cells, which carry oxygen; white blood cells, which fight infection and platelets, which clot blood.

A bone marrow transplant can help a patient generate his own blood cells and in doing so, restore the individual's immune system.

"Regular blood transfusions are like a Band-Aid on a wound," Pearce said. "It keeps (the patient) going, it doesn't generate new blood."

Minority match rare

And that's what Sherry Lamb and thousands of others need, a means to have their own body regrow their own, healthy blood.

Minorities in particular face poor odds at finding a match because there's an even greater shortage of donors among the Hispanic, African American and Asian communities. And unlike blood, bone marrow has to be a close DNA match for a transplant to work.

"Race matters," Pearce said. "Ed Bradley from 60 Minutes died of leukemia because he couldn't find a bone marrow match."

Pearce said minority enrollment on the national registry is low because of fear and myths surrounding the procedure and because most people aren't aware of the shortage of bone marrow donors. It also costs \$55 to join the registry, \$80 to expedite the screening process for an individual, like Lamb.

How process works

But after the initial fee, there is no additional cost to donate marrow. Once on the registry, an individual faces only a 1 in 70,000 chance of being matched to a patient. If selected, a marrow donor attends an information session to learn about the process. The donor will then receive a physical exam to discover if donating would pose any risk to either the patient or the donor. From there, the patient's physician determines if actual marrow is

needed to be collected through a surgical procedure, or if blood from the donor would suffice. Eligible donors must be between 18 and 60 years old.

The surgical procedure involves the withdrawal of liquid marrow from a hip or chest bone, Pearce said. It is a day surgery and though uncomfortable, "Most people are back to their normal activities in a day," Pearce said.

With blood donations, donors receive a drug called filgrastim for five days before the collection. The donor's blood is then removed through one arm, passed through a machine that separates out the blood-forming cells, then returned to the donor through the other arm.

Match unlikely

Realistically, the chances of finding a donor for Sherry Lamb are minimal from the 100 or so people who showed up at the marrow drive Sunday.

And Lamb knows that. "The chances of finding me a match might be one in a million," Lamb said. "But that's OK. The more people they get in the registry, the more lives will be saved."

And that's part of why the Gillettes have given of their time, money and possibly their marrow.

"It hits close to home when you know someone (like Sherry)," Debbie Gillette said. "But I don't think we could turn down helping someone else. That's why we're here, because someone needs help."