

The Gazette

Difficult hunt on for bone marrow donor

Double dilemma. Few in registry share patient's Caribbean lineage

ANNE SUTHERLAND, *The Gazette* 27 March 2008

Emru Townsend had a two-pronged reaction to his December diagnosis of leukemia: relief and a desire to find a bone marrow donor.

"I didn't know what was going on with my body, and I hate not knowing, so it was a relief," Townsend, 38, said yesterday from his bed at the Jewish General Hospital.



Medical student Bin Xu (left) and nurse Julie Sirois tend to Emru Townsend yesterday at the Jewish General Hospital, where he is battling a resistant strain of leukemia. Townsend needs a bone marrow transplant, but the highest likelihood of a match is with someone of Caribbean background.

JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

"Before all of this, I didn't know about bone marrow registries - none of it," he said as a nurse drew blood from his chest catheter to find out why he was running a fever.

"But I've found out a lot since then."

Townsend has taken his battle against cancer public to raise awareness for the need of Quebecers, and particularly people of Caribbean descent, to register as bone marrow donors.

Bone marrow can save lives, not the least his own.

For two weeks in early December, Townsend suffered what he thought were migraine headaches, had an unquenchable thirst, a dry throat and was unable to control his desire to urinate constantly.

When he couldn't control punishing chills that rattled his teeth, his wife, Vicky Vrinotis, insisted they leave their Pierrefonds home and go to the emergency room at the Lakeshore General Hospital.

A battery of tests showed he faced a triple threat: diabetes insipidus (which explained the thirst and urination), acute myeloid leukemia and monosomy 7.

The monosomy 7, a chromosomal change, complicates the diagnosis as it increases the risk of the leukemia returning no matter how successful chemo-therapy is.

"We asked the doctor for the two worst-case scenarios and she said lymphoma or leukemia," Vrinotis said. "I started to cry but Emru was calm."

Chemotherapy can slow the disease but Townsend needs new bone marrow to produce healthy blood for his body. His chances of finding a compatible donor are slim because 85 per cent of the 227,000 potential donors in the Canadian bone marrow registry are Caucasian.

Townsend is of Caribbean descent; his mother is from Jamaica, his father from Trinidad.

"The odds of finding a compatible donor increase the closer that donor is to my own background, with the same human leukocyte antigens," he said of the information he has assimilated in the past months.

His only sibling, Tamu, was tested but is incompatible.

Townsend has just finished his third course of chemotherapy. He has spent nearly three months in hospital.

Biopsies of his bone marrow are tested to see how effective the chemo has been at killing the abnormal cancer cells.

Once he is declared in remission, the search for a bone marrow donor begins in earnest.

"A bone marrow transplant is the deal breaker for me," Townsend said.

Diane Roy, director of the stem cell donor registry of Héma-Québec, said: "People are not aware of this program unless something happens to them and they need it."

Becoming a bone marrow donor is as simple as giving blood, which unfortunately only 3 per cent of eligible Quebecers do, Roy added.

The body replenishes donated bone marrow in six weeks.

To add your name to the bone marrow registry, go to www.hema-quebec.qc.ca and, under stem cells, click donor registry and how to join. Download the form, sign it and fax it back. Héma-Québec will contact you about testing for compatibility.

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