

## Plight of Montreal man highlights need for ethnic bone marrow donors

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MONTREAL — Emru Townsend needs help to beat cancer, and he's looking to Canadian black communities for the rare bone-marrow donation that could to put him on the mend.



Emru Townsend, who is battling leukemia, waits for a bone marrow transplant in his room at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal

Townsend, who comes from African-Caribbean roots, needs bone marrow from ethnic-minority donors who seldom sign up for Canadian marrow and stem-cell registries.

"It's so easy to do and it's so incredibly effective," says Townsend, an animation and technical writer.

"If you're a match for someone, it's a direct line. You give them marrow, you save their life."

"It's one of the easiest ways you can be a hero. You just make an appointment and you're done."

Townsend, 38, was diagnosed with leukemia in mid-December. Chemotherapy can help him but he needs new bone marrow to make healthy blood for his body.

While a bone-marrow match can come from anyone, someone of the same ethnic group is most likely to be a successful match.

The lack of minority donors perplexes organizations such as Hema-Quebec and Canada Blood Services.

Diane Roy, director of Hema-Quebec's bone-marrow registry, says 85 per cent of donors across Canada are Caucasian.

"Black - 0.5 per cent, Hispanic - 0.3 per cent," she says. "That's not enough donors."

Roy said most minorities seldom donate blood and usually don't step forward unless there's a crisis.

"They will react only if there is someone sick in the community."

She said Hema-Quebec does not have the capacity right now to actively recruit ethnic donors.

Ron Vezina, a spokesman for Canada Blood Services, said his organization is trying to boost the number of donors from minority groups.

"We probably haven't done a good enough job getting that message out to the ethnic groups," he said. "I think we're getting better at it but it requires a focus."

"I think initially we were kind of busy rebuilding the blood system from the tragedy of the '80s and '90s," he said, referring to the tainted blood scandal.

"Our focus was safety, safety, safety. Now we've kind of got strong infrastructure in place, we're looking at growth and addressing specific strategic needs. That diversified donor base is certainly one of them."

The registration procedure is simple and requires either a blood test or a cheek swab for typing. Donating stem cells involves a brief visit to the hospital for a simple extraction procedure. The body replaces the donated marrow within a few weeks.

Townsend and his family have an immediate goal finding his donor but they also want to raise awareness about the lack of ethnic donors to help others.

"We're just going to do whatever we can to make people aware of this because we realize, while I want to find a match for my brother, when this is over, there's no way this (effort) can stop," said Townsend's sister Tamu.

Tamu Townsend, who can't donate marrow to her brother because she is not a match, acknowledged the situation is taking a toll on the family and everyone is exhausted. But that's not stopping anybody.

Vicky Vriniotis, Townsend's wife, took a leave of absence from her job to care for him as well as their seven-year-old son.

Vriniotis is also surprised by how much she's learned.

"I'm of Greek background and we too are under-represented," Vriniotis said. "I'm quite surprised. People are out there giving blood and we're not doing anything else."

Townsend passes his days in his hospital bed, recovering from bouts of chemotherapy and reading a "vast collection of nerdy magazines, mostly computer stuff."

Visitors are frequent but must be garbed in hospital gowns, masks and gloves. His son usually stops by on the weekend to share a snack "if he doesn't have a runny nose or something."

Vriniotis says their son misses his dad but they talk on the phone every night.

"Not even hugs and kisses at this point because he's not allowed to touch him, but at least he gets to see him and chat with him so it's a good thing."