

The gift of life

Theodora Scarato 12/11/07

Now is the time of year when many people are thinking about what gifts to give others. Can you imagine being able to look back at your life's accomplishments, knowing that you gave someone the gift of life?

Two weeks ago, I learned Anuradha, the mother of two little girls about my own daughters' ages, has leukemia. A bone marrow transplant is her only chance of survival. As of the writing of this column, she cannot find a donor. The courageous determination of her and her family has inspired me, and I write this to get the word out.

Because I knew almost nothing about the subject, I Googled "bone marrow donation" and was shocked to learn how difficult it will be for Anuradha, who is of Indian decent, to find a donor match. As human leukocyte antigen tissue markers are inherited, she is more likely to find a match within her same racial or ethnic group. Only about 30 percent of people will find a match in their family, and the other 70 percent must search the National Marrow Donor Program registry for an unrelated marrow donor.

The statistics are staggering, with a one in 20,000 to a one in 100,000 chance of identifying an unrelated compatible marrow donor. For Anuradha, the chance dramatically decreases, as South Asians comprise only 1 percent of the NMDP registry. Therefore, I might get 12 matches in the registry, but a person of South Asian decent might get one or no matches.

This, it turns out, is also true for people of African, American Indian and Latino decent. According to the NMDP, minorities are vastly underrepresented in the registry and far less likely than whites to find a matching donor. One donor recruiter from Mississippi said, "83 percent of African-American patients searching for a donor won't find one."

While many communities are rallying to address this issue with drives and public education, more donors of all races, whites included, are desperately needed.

Each year, 9,000 Americans, one-third of them children, die waiting for a transplant because there are no matches in national registries.

Recent medical advances have made donating much less invasive than in the past.

First, you do not have to give blood to register as a donor. There is only a simple, painless cheek swab. No pieces of bones are taken out of your body.

There are two ways to donate marrow, and the new, increasingly common method is non-surgical, where peripheral stem cells are collected in an outpatient process similar to blood donation. The more known but less used method involves marrow collection from the donor's hip under anesthesia. After this type of donation, recovery takes a few days, and

the marrow fully regenerates within weeks. Aches and soreness are short-term side effects, but bone marrow transplantation is a relatively standard procedure, carrying few long-term risks to the donor. In fact, I scoured the Internet to find examples of donor death to no avail. Check out the National Marrow Donor Program website www.marrow.org for more information.

Last week, minutes before Anuradha's daughters' and my daughters' winter dance performance began, I sat down at the drive table, filled out my name and address and did a quick cheek swab. I can only hope my Greek and Sicilian blood will give someone a second chance at life.

Please do not wait until you are 36 years old like I did! I urge you to educate yourself on bone marrow donation. Consider if it is right for you. Initiate a drive with one of your student events. By registering to be a donor, you build up the blood marrow donor registry for Anuradha and the thousands waiting for a transplant.

Many volunteers who ended up donating bone marrow have talked about their experience in terms of it being their "good fortune" to be the perfect match for someone. And they would do it again if asked. May the new year bring us all closer to the fortunes we seek.

Theodora Scarato is an alumna of the university. She can be reached at theodorams@aol.com.