

Pregnant woman gives marrow to brother

By JAN JARVIS

Star-Telegram staff writer



Joanna Hildebrand holds her 21-month-old son, Elijah, on Thursday next to a picture of Hildebrand and her brother, Jared Waters, when they were children.

At L.D. Bell High School, Jared Waters was such an unrelenting debater that his younger sister Joanna always had to be ready to prove her point.

But when Waters became ill with leukemia and needed a bone marrow transplant, there was no debate as far as his sister was concerned.

Nevermind that she is seven months pregnant.

Or that her doctor had never encountered a similar situation.

"It was a no-brainer," said Joanna Hildebrand, a homemaker who lives in North Richland Hills. "It was what I wanted to do for him."

On Friday morning, surgeons extracted bone marrow from Hildebrand's pelvis during an hourlong procedure at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas. By afternoon, her marrow had been transplanted into her big brother, giving him a shot at survival.

About 80 percent of patients in need of a marrow or blood-cell transplant eventually find a donor through the National Marrow Donor Program, though not all of the surgeries are successful.

But Waters' situation was direr. His leukemia is very aggressive, and Waters couldn't wait any longer for the procedure, said Dr. Luis Pineiro, attending physician with Baylor's Marrow Transplant Program.

Everyone in his family was screened as a potential donor, but only Hildebrand was a match.

Only 30 percent of patients in need of a marrow or blood-cell transplant find a matched donor in their family, according to the National Marrow Donor Program.

Women who are pregnant can join the registry, but to protect the woman and the unborn child, donors typically are not eligible while pregnant. The guidelines apply only to transplants between unrelated people.

Pineiro said the risks to Hildebrand and her unborn child were minimal. Hildebrand said her greatest fear was that the pregnancy would prevent her from donating.

"I was more concerned that this would be Jared's only chance," she said. "I had a sense from the get-go that my baby would be fine."

Medical hurdles

Jared Waters, 28, has had one setback after another.

In May 2006, Waters had just finished training to become a firefighter with hopes of following in the footsteps of his father, Terry Waters, a Haltom City firefighter. He came down with what he thought was a virus.

It turned out to be leukemia, and Jared Waters, who had just celebrated his third wedding anniversary, immediately started chemotherapy.

The couple had no insurance, but friends held fundraisers to help cover the cost.

By October, blurred vision drove Jared Waters to the hospital. His family feared that the cancer had spread to his brain. He had five grand mal seizures and was in a medically induced coma for five days.

But he bounced back. By November, the cancer appeared to be gone. Waters planned to enroll in paramedic school at Brookhaven College in Dallas in February.

Health problems derailed his plans again in January. He needed surgery for a perforated colon. A month later he needed a second surgery when his colon did not heal properly.

"That time was really scary because they said they couldn't go back in a third time if it didn't work," said his wife, Christina Waters, who teaches second grade in Carrollton. "It's a complete miracle he's here today."

Waters returned home in May. A week later, doctors told him that the leukemia was out of control and that he needed to start chemotherapy, Christina Waters said.

They also told him a bone marrow transplant was his best hope.

Terry Waters said it was difficult knowing his son, daughter and granddaughter were all undergoing medical procedures Friday. But he said he is proud of his family and the decision his daughter made.

"I've always wanted my kids to think outside of themselves," he said. "This is the ultimate gift. Joanna is giving a part of herself for Jared."

Marrow Donor Program

By the numbers

25,000 -- Number of transplants the National Marrow Donor Program has facilitated since 1987 for patients who do not have matching donors in their family.

260 -- Number of transplants facilitated each month.

30 -- Percent of patients in need of a marrow or blood-cell transplant who find a match in their family.

How to help Jared Waters

Monetary donations may be sent to the Jared Waters Fund at Grace Community Church, 251 Countryside Court, Southlake, TX 76092

Track his progress at www.jaredwaters.blogspot.com

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