

Closing the ethnic gap

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By Angela Lee

Surrey MLA

Dave Hayer's son, Alexander, was diagnosed with leukemia the day after his 19th birthday.

Alexander found a positive bone marrow match in his sister, and underwent a transplant four years ago.

By his father's estimation, Alexander was very lucky.

Today, 511 patients across Canada – 114 from BC - are waiting for a stem cell match from someone outside their family.



If they are Caucasian, they have a 75 per cent chance of finding a good match.

If they are South Asian, Filipino, Black, or Chinese, the odds are stacked against them – sitting somewhere between 10 and 30 per cent.

“This is something that affects us all, regardless of income, age or ethnicity,” says Hayer, MLA for the riding of Surrey-Tynehead and Parliamentary Secretary for Multiculturalism and Immigration.

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OneMatch

This is where the OneMatch Stem Cell and Marrow Network comes in.

Formerly known as the Unrelated Bone Marrow Donor Registry, OneMatch has launched a new campaign aimed at recruiting a younger, more ethnically diverse group of committed volunteer donors.

As it stands, less than one in six potential donors on OneMatch is non-Caucasian. And the challenge becomes even greater in large urban centres like Vancouver and Toronto where there are many mixed-race children with more complicated stem cell markers.

"Our 220,000-strong potential donor base does not reflect the ethnic diversity in Canada," says OneMatch spokesperson Angela Reed.

That's why OneMatch has targeted their awareness campaigns at a young, diverse population. For this month's National Stem Cell and Bone Marrow Awareness Week, they partnered with Vancouver's HipHop Canada and Toronto's Flow 93.5FM to put on cross-country concerts.

"It's not fair, in any sense of the word, that one Canadian should have more of an opportunity to beat a bout of cancer than another, based simply on ethnicity," says HipHop Canada founder Jesse Plunkett, 24. "We can change these odds by making OneMatch more reflective of the ethnically diverse society we live in."

"Today, it's easier than ever to become a donor," says OneMatch's Reed. Volunteers simply register online at www.onematch.ca and are sent a buccal swab kit. They simply swab the four corners of inside their mouths and mail the samples back. "It's all very CSI," Reed adds.

"This is one gift that doesn't cost anything," says Hayer. "If we get our friends and neighbours to get more involved, more lives can be saved."