

## Doctor's life depends on donor match

**But search is difficult among neuroscientist's Bengali community**

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For most of his life, Dr. Abhijit Guha has tirelessly volunteered in the Bengali community, saving the lives of thousands of people.

Now he needs them to save his.

A renowned neuroscientist at Toronto's Western Hospital, Guha, 51, was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia earlier this month. He is confined to hospital and will soon need a bone-marrow transplant to survive.

It's a serious problem for a member of an ethnic minority like Guha, who was born in Calcutta in West Bengal, India.

"For whatever reason there seems some under-representation among certain ethnic groups in the (bone marrow) donor registry," he says, sitting in a bedside chair at Princess Margaret Hospital.

Normally chatty, he labours to maintain a quiet, snail-paced talk. "These can be potentially curable cancers, but you need the bone marrow match."

Found in the breastbone, ribs, hips, skull and spine, bone marrow produces nutrient-rich red blood cells, infection-battling white blood cells and platelets that help with clotting. Though donors and recipients don't have to be of the same ethnic background, most good marrow matches will be.

With an estimated 700,000 East Indians living in Canada and only about 4,800 registered donors, Guha's community is one of the most under-represented.

Canadian statistics were unavailable, but recent American figures estimate that South Asians have a 55 per cent chance of finding an unrelated matching donor through the national and international networks. None have been found yet for Guha. Between 70 and 80 per cent of Caucasians find matches in the U.S.



COLIN O'CONNOR/TORONTO STAR

Dr. Abhijit Guha is a doctor and leukemia patient at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. He is waiting for a bone marrow match to save his life.

If no suitable donor is found, doctors will likely ask one of Guha's two teenaged children to donate, a risk since they would only have half of the genetic markers needed for a good match.

And even with a good match, Guha notes, there is still nearly a one in five chance he will die. "But this is (my) best shot."

Guha came to Canada with his parents when he was 7, and his family has been heavily involved with the local Bengali community since.

But they also wanted to do more for Bengalis abroad, so Guha and his father decided to improve the low education rate among the poor in East India. For 30 years, they have run a free education centre for underprivileged adults and children. Then, about 10 years ago Guha met Dr. Robin Sengupta, another expatriate who wanted to help the Bengali people. Together they helped establish the National Neurosciences Centre in Calcutta, which offers below-cost life-saving operations for the area's poor and medical training to others. Guha flies in several times a year to help with operations and provide hands-on instruction.

"I have never met another human being who helps everybody, almost to a fault," Sengupta said. "That is what he does."

*Interested bone marrow donors can find more information or register online at [onematch.ca](http://onematch.ca).*