

Doctor seeks bone marrow donor

Torontonian needs a match from a South Asian

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 Vancouver Sun

Saturday, August 30, 2008

A Toronto neurosurgeon stricken with cancer is hoping someone in Canada's large South Asian community could be his bone-marrow match.

Western Hospital's Dr. Abhijit Guha was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia at the beginning of August, and because his first round of chemotherapy failed, he will need a bone marrow transplant to survive.



The cancer is progressing rapidly and Guha is confined to his bed in Princess Margaret Hospital.

On the phone, Guha, 51, spoke slowly between laboured breaths,

and explained why finding a bone marrow match won't be easy.

Guha came to Canada from Calcutta in East Bengal, India when he was seven years old, and ethnic minorities don't account for many of the people registered in Canada's national bone marrow registry.

He doesn't have any brothers or sisters, who doctors would normally test to find possible matches.

"Your physicians search to see if there's a match," Guha said. "One of the problems ... within the South Asian community is that the number of potential donors is relatively low. If we can increase awareness in the community -- that this is just like giving blood -- they might be more willing."

Looking within a group of people from the same ethnic background increases the odds of finding the best match, although other matches can occur.

Because of Metro Vancouver's high population of South Asian people, someone living in the area could be a match for Guha.

"I think a lot of people maybe don't know [about the registry], but there could be other cultural issues," Guha said.

If more people register, the pool will get larger, and more people suffering from cancer will benefit, Guha said.

Besides his neurosurgery practice at Western Hospital, Guha runs a research laboratory and lectures frequently, but says he enjoys returning

CREDIT: Keith Oxley, UHN Photographics
 Toronto neurosurgeon Dr. Abhijit Guha has leukemia and needs a bone marrow transplant. He is of South Asian descent but not many South Asians have put their names on the bone-marrow registry.

to Calcutta for humanitarian work.

For the past 10 years, he has helped run a hospital in India that treats poor residents, and hopes to help open another facility with 150 beds within the next year.

"I'm hopeful," he said of his condition. "I've had one strike against me with this chemotherapy not working. But there's still hope that this could be a curable thing."

The ethnic demographics of the registrants in OneMatch, Canada's registry of potential stem cell and bone marrow donors, are far from representative of the country's ethnic groups.

Out of approximately 230,000 registrants, 83 per cent were Caucasian, according to statistics gathered last month.

Four per cent were East Asian and three per cent were South Asian.

Signing up for the registry is an easy process, said Angie Gaddy, Vancouver spokeswoman for Canadian Blood Services.

A sign-up questionnaire can be filled out online and participants can send in a genetic sample on a cheek swab in the mail.

"We will then log their genetic markers," she said, "which can then be matched up with other markers."

For more information, visit www.onematch.ca

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