

Donate marrow, save a life: More African-Americans needed to donate bone marrow

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Am I my brother's keeper?

Though the question is Biblical, it is also topical. What responsibility does one have in relation to his or her fellow human? If one has the ability to save a life, should not that person take the steps to do so – especially if the first step is to simply supply a harmless and painless cheek swab?

These questions are raised when asking why so few African-Americans are registered with Be the Match, a program operated by the National Marrow Donor Program. The National Marrow Donor Program is headquartered in Minneapolis.

The plight of finding matches for those in need of life-saving bone marrow transplants was recently highlighted when popular journalist Robin Roberts, co-host of ABC's "Good Morning America" recently chronicled her search for a match. Roberts was diagnosed with MDS, a rare, life-threatening bone marrow disorder. Roberts was able to receive a transplant courtesy of her sister, Sally-Ann Roberts and is currently in hospital isolation attempting to recover from the

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illness. Thankfully for Roberts, she had an immediate match willing to donate the potentially life-saving marrow. But thousands more are still searching, hoping they too will find matches to save their lives.

Many searching for matches are disadvantaged in the process because they are African-American. While a donor need not be of the same ethnicity as a recipient, the chances are far greater that a match will be found within people of the same ethnicity. According to Be the Match, African-Americans make up just seven percent of registered donors.

The list of those waiting for a transplant includes 12-year-old Valaria Fenderson. Fenderson suffers from sickle cell anemia, a serious, life-threatening disorder in which the body makes sickle-shaped red blood cells. Sickle cell anemia is almost exclusive to African-Americans.

"Valaria's story can be anybody's story," said Fenderson's mother, Cameca Wright.

Wright said at just six years of age, Fenderson's right lung collapsed and she required a whole body blood transfusion. Fenderson has also had to have her gallbladder removed and suffers from chronic pain. Up until this year, according to Wright, her daughter was on 13 different medications.

"Just this past January the doctors told me they couldn't give (Valaria) any more narcotics because she would be in danger of liver and other organ failure," said Wright, who lives in Atlanta, and is a native of St. Louis. "It's a difficult situation."

Fenderson was found to be a candidate for a bone marrow transplant because her form of sickle cell anemia is curable with a successful transplant. But to date, Fenderson has not been able to find a qualified match.

So why is there such a shortage of donors?

"I think there tends to be a lot of fear and misconception about bone marrow donation," said Kristine Reed, a donor recruiter with Be the Match. "People see movies like 'Seven Pounds' and (marrow donation) is depicted as a painful process where the person is awake for the procedure."

According to Reed, that is a Hollywood fallacy. "Generally a donor donates marrow through the hip and they are asleep for the process," said Reed.

And to register with Be the Match, the process simply involves filling out a confidential form and submitting to a cheek swab.

"For someone to be a match the probability is it's a once in a lifetime chance – if ever, (that a donor will match a recipient)," said Reed.

But that one match could save a life.

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Reed said Be the Match is seeking donors of varying ages and ethnicities, but donors between the ages of 18-44 are most critical. "Doctors have told us that patients benefit most from younger donors," said Reed.

Also, Be the Match is looking for women to donate umbilical cords and placenta, both which could be used in certain type transplants. Marrow transplants, though, have been shown to provide better rates of success, said Reed.

Be the Match has set up a special webpage for readers of Insight News who are interested in becoming a donor. That address is join.marlow.org/insightnews. The site will not load if the traditional www is typed into the address box. To contact Reed directly with questions about bone marrow donation, call (612) 616-6534 or email kreed2@nmdp.org.

Wright has established the Valaria Fenderson Foundation for her daughter and others like her daughter seeking bone marrow transplants. The foundation's website is <http://www.valariafendersonfoundation.org>.

"In spite of it all, we're still going to press through," said Wright.