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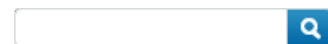


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Chinese community to launch drive for stem cell donors

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Joseph Hall
Health Reporter

Jason Cheung was really hoping to tell his story.

The 23-year-old York University physics student was going to sit in front of a news conference Friday morning and explain how his search for a matching stem cell donor had so far proven fruitless, and how the acute myeloid leukemia, which a marrow transplant could have cured, had brought him to the brink of death.

But Cheung won't be there.

His blood cancer, eminently treatable with the stem cells replete in healthy donor marrow, has put him in the intensive care unit of a Toronto hospital, where his search may well be over.

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Jason Cheung, who has acute myeloid leukemia, was to have spoken at a Friday event urging Chinese Canadians to add their names to a national stem cell registry. But he won't be able to because he's in the ICU of a Toronto hospital.

SUPPLIED IMAGE

But Susan Go hopes that Cheung's missing narrative will still be heard.

And Go, co-chair of the [National Chinese Stem Cell Drive](#), hopes it will help prompt thousands of Chinese

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Canadians to enter this country's stem cell database, so that avoidable tragedies like Cheung's won't be repeated.

"This is what we're confronting in the Chinese community... it's like a death sentence," says Go.

"If you need a stem cell donor for transplant and you are a Chinese patient, chances are you're not going to find one and you'll die waiting for one to be found."

The conference is also being held by the [One Match](#) stem cell and marrow network, which links national registries across the globe in matching donor searches.

It will announce the first-ever national Chinese stem cell drive, to take place March 27 with collection sites in both Vancouver and Toronto, homes to the nation's largest Chinese populations.

Steven Pho, also 23 and also a York University student, joins Cheung on a poster to advertise the drive.

He also joins Cheung as a young man whose chance for finding a match may soon run its course.

Diagnosed with leukemia in 2006, Pho has undergone years of chemotherapy yet is now running out of time too, Go says.

To effectively treat the disease, doctors need to kill off a patient's own defective bone marrow, and replace it with healthy tissue from a matching donor. The new marrow would contain healthy stem cells that could generate a disease-free blood supply.

Currently, Chinese Canadians make up only 2 per cent – or some 5,000 entrants – of this country's stem cell registry. Internationally, people of Chinese heritage make up an exceedingly small and disproportionate 2 per cent of global databases.

By contrast, Caucasians make up 82 per cent of Canada's registry, giving patients of European backgrounds a far better chance at finding a donor match.

"For Chinese patients, the chance of finding a match donor with an unrelated donor is only about 10 per cent," Go says.

"Caucasian patients have about an 80 per cent chance... so there's a huge gap between the two populations."

And the specific need for Chinese donors is acute. While siblings provide the best hope for amenable stem cell transplants in any population, only 30 per cent of people needing them will find a match in a brother or sister.

The other 70 per cent will typically need to seek out an unrelated donor, with people from their own ethnic groups providing by far the best odds for a match.

The Chinese community is not the only one lagging behind in willing registrants, says John Bromley, public affairs manager with One Match, an arm of the Canadian Blood Services.

"If you're like myself, about as white as they come and I need a stem cell transplant, my capability of finding a perfect match are much greater because my heritage represents 82 per cent of the network," Bromley says.

"It's not the same if you're diverse. That means that only 18 per cent of that network is

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available to all the diversities.”

Bromley says other ethnic communities have set up counterparts to the Chinese “Other Half” initiative, which aims to recruit potential donors under the national organization’s umbrella.

Recruitment groups have also been set up by the Latino, South Asian and Jewish communities, he says.

Go says a cultural faith in traditional Chinese medicines has made many new immigrants from that community distrustful of western therapies, like bone marrow transplants.

But a simple ignorance of the problem’s scope is the main reason Chinese Canadians are so woefully under-represented in our own stem cell registries, she says.

“I think what we’re seeing is that people simply don’t know that there is a tremendous and urgent need for more Chinese Canadians to register with One Match,” Go says. “And a lot of people don’t know how easy it is.”

Where it was once necessary to give a blood sample to enter the registry, a simple mouth swab will supply all the markers needed to determine if a marrow transplant will avoid an immune response rejection in the recipient patient.

There are currently about 20,000 Chinese Canadians seeking suitable donors.

“So the Chinese have to work really hard to increase that (potential donor) number,” Go says.

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