





# 20th Anniversary of Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center

On the eve of its 20th anniversary, Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center (BTCSCC) set a new record - a bone marrow match in Hungary. In nearly 20 years, BTCSCC in Taiwan has provided 3,440 bone marrow stem cells to patients in 29 countries/nations among Chinese, Caucasians, Indians and other ethnic groups.

People of Taiwan have given new hopes to blood related disease patients. The donor registry, BTCSCC, has collected more than 380 thousand samples for marrow donation around the world. Up to date, BTCSCC even has samples from the United States.

Twenty years after BTCSCC's inception, the pioneers and international scholars savored the challenges they faced in the early days. Hundreds of Tzu Chi volunteers listened closely to the lecture held by BTCSCC for the latest medical information. The bone marrow donors and recipients merrily came together near the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2013.

Through the years, BTCSCC has delivered love and care to all five continents, transcending regional and racial boundaries.

On October 8th 2013, Mr. Csaba Illes from Hungary, received the bone marrow stem cells collected by Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center and immediately flew to Budapest in three connection flights over 8,000 kilometers. He needed to bring the bone marrow back within 24 hours to a patient who had been through annihilation therapy and was awaiting a transplant.

This happened at the eve of BTCSCC's 20th anniversary, and it was the 3,340th bone-matching case. Hungary became the 29th country that BTCSCC has donated a matched bone marrow from its registry.

### 36 Pairs of Donor-Recipient Cheerfully Got Together

BTCSCC's 20th anniversary coincided closely to Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA)'s annual convention, so the "Happy Reunion" Event, (a meeting for the bone marrow donors and recipients) was held at TIMA annual convention party. Stem cells donation, one of Tzu Chi's "Eight Dharma Footprints, was the theme for TIMA annual convention.

Since the receipt of WMDA's (The World Marrow Donor Association)



Left Photo: Hungarian National Ambulance Emergency Service member Mr. Csaba Illes (left) receives bone marrow stem cells from Dr. Ruey-Ho Kao, Superintendent of Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital and Mr. Guo-Liang Yang, Director of BTCSCC. After its 20 years of establishment, Hungary becomes BTCSCC's 29th recipient country.



**Recipient Kyle (second left) and his family travel from the US to meet with his donor Shi-Zhen Lin (first left).**

certificate on Oct 1, 2010, BTCSCC officially became an international marrow database. BTCSCC also provided annual professional training for its volunteers.

This year, a two-and-half day seminar was scheduled from Sep 19 through 21 to certify volunteers as part of the 20th anniversary celebration. Aside from the “Happy Reunion” Event, the agenda also included professional lectures hosted by international experts. There were about 800 participants.

After years of absence, the “Happy Reunion” event coordinators invited 36 pairs of donors and recipients to join the occasion this year. The reunion was held in two sessions; one was in the morning at the Tzu Chi University and one was in the afternoon at the Jing Si Hall. Participants were personally invited by Director of BTCSCC, Mr. Yang, Manager Nai-Yu Chen and Zhu-Yu Zhang when they travelled to partner hospitals in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Suzhou in May 2013.

Anticipating the Moment, Donors and Recipients Thank Each Other When They Met

“Though we didn’t know each other, yet fate brought us together. You saved my life...” All the connection started from a match of the bone

marrow in the first place.

The first reunion session was held at the performing hall in the Da Ai Building. Some participants had waited many years for this moment. Once emcee Ms. Tzu-Yun announced the names, the beneficiaries showed their gratitude in many ways - some presented flowers, some bowed and hugged the donors in tears or even knelt before them.

"The donor has the same name as my dad..." As she met her donor Mr. Qi-Feng Wu, Ms. Ya-Yi Liao hugged Mr. Wu in tears and astonishment. Living in Guangzhou, Ms. Liao was "born again" through Mr. Wu's virtue, and she never expected that Mr. Wu would have the same name as her dad.

"Once I stepped into the hall, I told my wife: 'That is him. It's got to be him!'"

After twelve years of waiting, Mr. Shi-Qing Dai crossed the flower-strewn "Gate of Life" on the platform and tightly hugged his donor Jia-Qi Guo. It is so surreal that mere strangers can identify the donor by instinct.

"My life is not me. The blood in my vein also belongs to my Taiwanese brother. I will pay it forward whenever I can." Shi-Qing Dai was in good

The volunteers never thought it was hard work campaigning for bone marrow donation. They walk the street whenever they had time, rain or shine.





**Donor Mr. Zhi-Jian Zhao's wife hugged recipient Sheng-Kai Luo (third right) and said she wanted to hug her adopted son.**

condition after the transplant. He said not only did the donor save his life, but he also salvaged his nearly shattered family. Now he can continue teaching to inspire more students.

Living in Taichung, Xin Fang, an art teacher from Taichung never gave up her interest in arts after she got sick. Instead, she alleviated her pain by turning focusing to painting.

She painted natural scenery for the donor-recipient meeting and gave it to her donor. In the painting, there were two butterflies, symbolizing her appreciation to the donor Mr. Mu-Qiao Wang. Because of him, her child was not left motherless and her husband was not without a companion. Mr. Wang also said that his life has changed for the better after the donation. He had just passed the examination to become a teacher.

Among the twenty pairs of donors and recipients, some have waited for three years and some more than twenty years for this meeting. Witnessed by their friends and families alongside Tzu Chi volunteers, the participants turned years of gratitude into blessings for each other at the event.

## Greeting a Long-lost Family Member

The red lanterns, emitting warm amber rays, set the Mid-Autumn Festival mood for the audience in the Hall. On September 19 2013, sixteen pairs of donors and recipients from South Africa, United States, Vietnam, Singapore, China and Taiwan met as they were surrounded by volunteers and TIMA members.

Sheng-Kai Luo, who lived in Sichuan, was diagnosed with severe Thalassemia four months after birth. Unfortunately, his blood type was the rare RH negative. He needed blood transfusion every month to survive, but his family was overwhelmed by the expensive medical bills and shortage of his blood type from the bank. The endless treatment was daunting, and hopelessness seemed to inundate the whole family.

“I want an operation; I want to live,” the four-year-old Sheng-Kai Luo told his father. His families then started the arduous journey in search for a bone marrow match.

“We gave him an unhealthy body but the donor from Tzu Chi Taiwan gave him hope.” Sheng-Kai Luo is now nine years old. His father thanked the donor emotionally as he was aware of the countless children in China who were still awaiting treatment.

## Reminiscing of the Past, Taiwan Was Never Short of Goodwill

“Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cell Center” (BTCSCC) was renamed after the reorganization on April 30, 2002. The original name since its establishment on Oct 20, 1993 was “Tzu Chi Foundation Marrow Donor Registry”. The pioneering members were used to calling it “Bone marrow Registry” “Bone marrow database.” One of the most senior members is Vice President of Tzu Chi Foundation, Ms. Pi-Yu Lin.

“Master Cheng Yen couldn’t bear to see lives perishing and families suffering due to lack of treatment.” Ms. Lin reminded us, after consulting with medical specialists and assuring that the donors’ health would not be compromised, Tzu Chi established the bone marrow database.

In just two years, Tzu Chi raised 100 thousand blood samples and



**The caregiving team member's certification course energizes the volunteers and equips them with advanced professional skills.**

stunned Academia with its efficiency. Japan and Singapore both paid us a visit.

Vice President Ms. Lin told everyone, “ Master will not jeopardize a life for the sake of saving another.” “Years ago, when people had limited knowledge about bone marrow donation, they thought it was a frightening undertaking. In some countries, the fear was so great, we heard stories about one brother forcing the other to donate at gunpoint.” “Even with the lack of knowledge, most disciples followed Master’s ‘Just do it’ attitude and campaigned all over the country to encourage donation. Up to date, we have sponsored more than 2,000 blood testing events for marrow matching. Thousands of donors have testified that donating bone marrow will not put their health at risk.”

## Best Decision in Life

In the forum, Professor Yao-Chang Chen, Dr. Chang-Chung Wang, Principal Yun Yen, Principle of Taipei Medical University, Dr. Cheng-Kuang Hsiao, Vice President Lin, Dr. Chin-Lon Lin, CEO of Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, and Ruey-Ho Kao, Superintendent of Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital remembered the tidbits of the establishment of the bone marrow database.

Professor Chen of Taiwan University Medical School was the first to perform a bone marrow transplant in Taiwan. He said it was the “best decision of his life” which allowed him to sit at this forum.

In 1991, Professor Chen was in Hong Kong attending the Asian-Pacific Hematology Consortium and was shocked to see that Hong Kong was launching a bone marrow donation function for a Taiwanese patient. Once he got back to Taiwan; he pushed for local movement of blood sample donation.

In 1992, Taiwanese overseas student Wen-Ling Wen was diagnosed with Leukemia in the US. She was not able to find a match among her parents and siblings. Her school and Tzu Chi US both tried to find a match in the Asian American communities.

At the end of the year, she returned to Taiwan and requested the government to lift restrictions on organ transplants. Wen’s mother and sister, along with Professor Chen all accompanied her for a meeting with Ms. Po-Ya Chang, then head of the Department of Health. The ban was lifted on April of next year with overwhelming approval in the legislature.

On Aug 29, 1993, Taiwan University Medical School first launched a blood sample donation. Professor Chen felt that the mission was beyond his means and turned it over to Tzu Chi.

He commented, “I am glad to see that we’ve gone this far, and I believe I made the best decision of my life then.”

Besides Tzu Chi blood sample database, Professor Chen also praised Tzu Chi’s umbilical cord blood repository becoming the largest one in Taiwan. Usually, umbilical cord blood repository is run by the government due to its high cost.

The only thing professor Chen regretted was that he was not able to become a donor because of his age.



**Dr. Cheng-Jung Wang, Professor Yao-Chang Chen, Principal Yun Yen, and Dr. Hsiao, along with Vice President Ms. Pi-Yu Lin, Hospital Sup't Ruey-Ho Kao and CEO Chin-Lon Lin jointly reminiscing of the early years of BTSCC.**

## **An Internal Medicine Doctor in the Operating Room**

The first transplant between nonrelatives in Taiwan was performed by Director of Hematology of Tri-Service General Hospital, Dr. Chang-Chung Wang. The donor was Mei-Jing Yeh, and the recipient was Zhi-Xiang Wei. This was also the first case for BTCSCC.

Dr. Wang said, “ This function is greatly motivational for donors, thanks to Tzu Chi for providing a wonderful platform. My special thanks to the volunteers. The whole operation wouldn't have been smooth had it not been for them.”

“Sometimes even the donor may misunderstand or the families may criticize us. But we took it all in and patiently explained to them so we could regain their trust. This effort has greatly improved our rate of success.”

Dr. Cheng-Kuang Hsiao was the first executive secretary. He remembered that we did not have our lab and had to send the blood samples overseas for testing. He accompanied Tzu Chi Vice President Pi-Yu Lin in negotiating the price with Paul Terasaki of the University of California to reduce our financial burden. Dr. Hsiao hoped that our database would continue to expand and perhaps one day he can become a donor.

Dr. Ruey-Ho Kao, Sup't of Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, is a hematologic oncologist. He came to work for Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital when the bone



**Donating 10 cc blood as stem cells sample can save a life.**

marrow campaign was at its peak. He also joined the first bone marrow transplant.

Dr. Kao said, “We didn’t have the sample of the surrounding cells at the time so the donor needed to be put under general anesthesia so I could extract bone marrow from a donor. Because I was the only doctor in the department, I needed to perform this procedure three times a week. People saw me often in the operation room and mistook me for a surgeon.”

In order to maintain high quality and density of bone marrow so the recipients can get the most effective treatment, the medical team brainstormed many ideas and asked everyone to join in and lend a helping hand.

### **Eliminating the Psychological Barrier and Keeping Hopes Alive**

Dr. Yun Yen, specializes in hematologic oncology, used to work at the City of Hope National Medical Center, a renowned cancer treatment and bone marrow transplant center in California. Dr. Yen recalled that when Master decided to build the bone marrow registry, he tried his best to help even though he was inexperienced in the field. Never did he realize that this was not something he can handle singlehandedly, and it relied on many others who all came to Master’s calling.

Years later, earlier challenges such as the special skills required in the extraction or the replacement of blood test with DNA test have all been resolved.

Dr. Chin-Lon Lin, CEO of Taiwan Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, also helped in transporting the blood samples when he volunteered at the Los Angeles free clinic center. At that time, whenever blood sample was obtained in Taiwan, it needed to be on the next flight to Los Angeles then to Dr. Terasaki’s lab. Any delay in shipment would negatively affect the

quality of the sample.

Dr. Lin specifically praised the behind-the-scene team including the caretaking team formed in 1994. They helped in collecting, recording, matching, explaining and accompanying the donors. They elevated Tzu Chi bone marrow registry to become the highest donor rate and best quality registry in Taiwan.

### **Passing Down the Mission as Well as Love and Care**

During the forum, Dr. Terasaki shared the status quo and the vision of global organ transplant. Dr. Shinichiro Okamoto shared his experience in Japanese bone marrow database so all participants could be informed of the medical trend in the world.

Although second afternoon discussion and next day classes were canceled due to Typhoon, volunteers had already been trained and equipped with lifesaving knowledge before they returned to their posts in the community.

The twentieth anniversary was organized by thirty BTCSCC employees and two hundred volunteers. It brought 36 pairs of donor-recipient face to face, got 2500 caregiving volunteers, and medical workers got together in this heartfelt meeting. We believe the world became a better place because of the participants' endeavor.

The experience of the lean and mean days at the beginning makes BTCSCC stronger. Thanks to all donors from Taiwan and 2,000 caregiving volunteers as well as all those who are concerned. It lies within each and every one of us to rekindle the hope of patients with blood-related diseases.

