



Witness the Worldly Goodness

Written by Ruey-Ho Kao, Superintendent of Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital

To fulfill the wish to meet with their donors, thirty-some bone marrow receivers from Africa, the United States, Singapore, Vietnam, China and Taiwan gathered together in Hualien on the 20th anniversary of Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center to pay their gratitude and blessings to those who saved their lives.

“Tzu Chi and I are looking for someone, and that someone may be you!” The advertisement where movie star Jacky Chen searched through the crowds for potential donors was produced soon after the Center was founded. The general public at the time were unfamiliar with the transplant procedures and bone marrow donors were scarce. And in 2013, the Center had its 20th anniversary. We are grateful towards each donor as well as our volunteers, for they shed a light of hope on the patients and their families.

When Dharma Master Cheng Yen, out of compassion, determined to build a bone marrow registry containing the data of hundreds of thousands potential donors, many regarded it as mission impossible. Particularly among Chinese society, the traditional precept dictates that “The body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents, and so one doesn’t dare damage them”, further challenged the establishment of the registry.

“We will never sacrifice one’s health to save another,” Master Cheng Yen

emphasized. Over the years, tens of thousands Tzu Chi volunteers undertook the responsibility to recruit potential donors across the nation, while challenging the widespread misconceptions on bone marrow transplant.

The Tzu Chi volunteers, who were responsible for recruiting potential bone marrow donors, were often showered with insults, misunderstanding and poor results. Yet they never faltered. It was their determination which allowed the registry to grow into what it is today. As of October 2013, the Center has accumulated the information of over 380,000 potential donors in the registry, received approximately 37,000 patient applications, and completed 3,761 bone marrow and peripheral blood stem cell transplant (PBSCT). The selfless love has spread across over 29 countries.

Servicing in Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital and specialize in hematology and oncology, I was there when the bone marrow donor recruitment began, witnessing the love of Taiwan. To minimize the time transporting bone marrow from donor to patient, the operating team and the anesthesia team had to schedule their first operation of the day earlier than usual. Since Hematology and Oncology were shorthanded, doctors from all departments were involved in the transplantation. It was not until October 2002 when the Ministry of Health and Welfare passed the law on unrelated peripheral blood stem cell transplantation, did the Center began introducing relevant technologies and ultimately completed its first peripheral blood transplantation the following August. Since then, the number of bone marrow transplantation gradually reduced to an average of one case per month.

“Saving a life without harming oneself” is an effective slogan when it comes to recruiting stem cell donors. It is still a common misconception that bone marrow refers to the essence of life within the spine. In fact, bone marrow for the transplantation is extracted from posterior superior iliac crest on either side of the pelvis, avoiding the central nervous system as a whole. However, all medical procedure comes with a risk. The transplantation requires general anesthesia, which has its own risks, hence assessment and

doctor evaluation have to be done beforehand to screen out high risk donors and to ensure the safety of the transplant procedure. Peripheral blood transplantation, on the other hand, does not require anesthesia.

In addition to recruiting potential donors and building up the registry, the bone marrow care team, consist of Tzu Chi commissioners and Tzu Cheng members, attends to the donors with meticulous care. These volunteers endeavor to keep the donors in a healthy state mentally and physically to ensure the quality of the stem cells, which in turn maximizes the survivability of the receivers. Their responsibility begin as soon as a match is found. Many volunteers had witnessed a change of heart by the potential donors who later refused to donate, or was halted by their family members; yet with the perseverance of the volunteers, majority of the donors completed the transplantation to save lives. The respect and attentive care offered by the volunteers to the donors are the most prominent feature of Tzu Chi stem cell donation, a feature that converted many donors to the rank of Tzu Chi bone marrow volunteers, who had borne witness to the slogan, "Saving a life without harming oneself".

The Center initiated a certificate course on the bone marrow donor care team on its anniversary in 2008. The procedure which complies with international standard further completed Tzu Chi's entire transplantation procedure and enhanced the professional skills of the volunteers, who then educate others in their respective community and pass on accurate information. As of 2008, the number of volunteers participated in the certificate course almost reached 2,000. Additionally, the Center also began basic and advanced certificate course all around Taiwan, and as of last year, the number of participants exceeded 6,000.

Life is precious. Master Cheng Yen frequently reminded us that life cannot be measured with monetary wealth. Behind every donor is a touching story. All stem cell donors, who always kept in heart their blessings for their stem cell receivers, are grateful for Master Cheng Yen's vow to found the



Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center volunteers in Taiwan go everywhere to encourage blood sampling to the donor registry for one more sample brings one more life-saving chance.

registry, grateful for this unique opportunity to save the life of another, grateful for the meticulous care of the Tzu Chi volunteers, grateful to everyone who transformed Taiwan into the Island of Love.

During the reunion between the donors and the receivers, we had felt profoundly the helplessness of the receivers and their family in the wake of death, the countless days and nights where hope and despair intertwines, and the torment of waiting for a miracle when in distress. When finally met face to face with the bone marrow donors, the receivers were often emotional and speechless, as if they were reuniting with a long lasting family; all they can do was to give a deep embrace while tears streaming down their face. We the audience were also deeply moved by these emotional moments and wept with them. While witnessing the stories of saving lives, we shall continue to uphold the profound cultural characteristics of gratitude, respect and love, endeavor in our life saving missions.