

Woman gives blood cells to save the life of a stranger

By JAN JARVIS

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Friends told her she was crazy. Relatives begged her to reconsider her decision. But Nadia Alareksoussi wanted to help a stranger who needed a bone marrow transplant, and she didn't care what she had to go through to do it.

"People kept saying they would never do it or that it would be too painful," the 21-year-old Arlington woman said. "Either way, I figured it needed to be done."



As a participant in a study on peripheral blood stem-cell donation, Alareksoussi helped save the life of a young mother with cancer. Researchers with the National Marrow Donor Program are comparing this type of transplant with bone marrow donation using unrelated donors to see which method works best. The transplants are needed to treat leukemia and other blood disorders.

The complex study depends on patients and donors who are willing to help determine what is the most effective transplant, said Dr. Dennis Confer, National Marrow Donor Program's chief medical officer.

"It is really heroic of them to participate in this," he said.

Donors ages 18 to 60 are accepted for the study, but young adults are especially suited for the project because they have more robust bone marrow, Confer said.

Alareksoussi became a part of the study in June, and will be followed over the next three years.

Sacrifice, commitment

Alareksoussi's mother, Janet, initially was concerned for her daughter's health and possible side effects. But Alareksoussi -- who had signed up to be a bone marrow donor after a classmate at Arlington's Lamar High School needed a transplant in 2005 -- was committed to helping. There was no stopping her, her mother said.

"Nadia and I both thought about how it was such a small sacrifice compared to being able to possibly prolonging someone's life," she said. "I am proud that she had been blessed with such a giving heart."

Participating in the study over the summer meant that Alareksoussi got daily injections to increase the number of blood-forming cells. As the refrigerated drug filgrastim was injected in both of her arms, Alareksoussi felt a rush of coldness. An hour later, the pain hit.

"My tailbone, my hips, bones I didn't even know were there started hurting," she said.

She couldn't eat because her jaw ached. As the drug moved marrow out of her largest bones -- including her pelvis, femurs and tailbone -- sitting, walking and sleeping became painful.

More than 80 percent of bone marrow donors have fairly significant aches and pains during the five days they are injected with filgrastim, Confer said. The drug stimulates bone marrow, causing the pain.

"The good news is the pain stops almost immediately after they make the donation," he said.

A week later, during a 10-hour procedure, Alareksoussi's blood was removed through a needle in one arm and passed through a machine that separated out the blood-forming cells. The blood was then returned to her body.

The Southwestern University student, who recently learned that the woman who received her cells was cancer-free, said she has no regrets about participating in the study and would do it again to help a stranger.

"I feel like she needed it to survive," Alareksoussi said. "And I was able to help her out."

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PERIPHERAL BLOOD CIRCULATING CELL TRANSPLANTS

What it is: A transplant using cells collected from the bloodstream rather than the bone marrow.

Why it's important: An estimated 70 percent of patients do not find a suitable match in their families and must turn to unrelated donors. Only two out of every 10 patients receive the transplant they need.

Why the method is being studied: Peripheral blood stem cells grow much faster than bone marrow. But in some patients complications developed. Researchers want to determine which method is best for patients and donors.

Who can participate: Donors must be 18 to 60 and be matched with a recipient, give informed consent and be medically eligible. A total of 550 patient and donor pairs are needed.

Who's running the study: The National Marrow Donor Program and the Marrow Transplant Clinical Trials Network.

More information: Visit www.marrow.org. Donors can sign up online but must order a tissue-typing kit for \$52. Donors also may sign up in person during drives throughout North Texas.

Source: The National Marrow Donor Program

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