



(From left) Former Etoile FC youth trainee Antoine Viterale, leukaemia survivor Muhamed Reza and Young Lions player Shamil Sharif at a Bone Marrow Donor Programme event to raise awareness about the cause on Thursday. Fifteen-year-old Reza, who received a transplant in 2009, said "this programme has changed my life". ST PHOTO: RAJ NADARAJAN

Bone marrow donor list 'woefully small'

Nearly 80% of patients' requests go unanswered, says donor programme

By LIM MIN ZHANG

NEARLY 80 per cent of requests for bone marrow donations in Singapore still go unanswered.

Fears about the medical procedure and a lack of awareness of the need for bone marrow are the main reasons why the volunteer donor list is "woefully small".

The statistic was revealed by the Bone Marrow Donor Programme (BMDP), a non-profit organisation that manages Singapore's only register of voluntary bone marrow donors. Its president, Ms Jane Prior, likens the situation to "people starving to death outside an NTUC FairPrice (supermarket)" as medical facilities and know-how are widespread here and all it takes to sign up is a two-minute cheek swab.

The current list of 55,000 donors is inadequate as the chance

of a good match is one in 20,000 for people of the same race who are unrelated by blood. The chance of a match is even lower across races.

BMDP gets up to 40 requests a month from hospitals here, and about half are from Singaporeans.

But only about 50 local transplants were made in each of the last three years. Most patients who seek transplants are terminally ill and do not survive unless a suitable match is found.

"I hope more young people will sign up because this programme has changed my life," said 15-year-old Queenstown Secondary student Muhamed Reza, who was diagnosed with leukaemia when he was 11.

He received a transplant from a then anonymous donor in 2009 and has made a full recovery.

He met his donor, Ms Grace

Tong, 29, this year. The assistant manager said: "My mum was a bit concerned about the complications, but I told her that it's safe. It's a worthy cause because I felt, it's still a life to be saved."

Ms Tong, who described the one-hour procedure as "uncomfortable, but painless", signed up as a donor when she was a Singapore Management University undergraduate in 2003.

No donor has suffered complications after the procedure and most return to work or school in two or three days, said Ms Prior, adding: "The impact on anybody who is healthy is minimal as your bone marrow is completely replaced within four to six weeks."

Any healthy person between the ages of 18 and 49 is eligible for a cheek swab. Potential donors can apply via BMDP's website at www.bmdp.org or at its South Bridge Road office. The organisation plans to visit schools in its bid to recruit 20,000 more donors in the next three years.

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