

MORE NAMES NEEDED IN REGISTRY

Encouraging peers to donate bone marrow

SMU society to hold drive this Wednesday and Thursday to recruit 400 to 500 new donors

EMILY LIU
 emilyliu@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – When raising funds just was not “satisfying” enough, a group of undergraduates decided to focus their efforts on an area where they felt youths could uniquely make a direct difference.

And so, the Singapore Management University (SMU) Business Society partnered with the Bone Marrow Donor Programme (BMDP) to recruit young donors.

This Wednesday and Thursday, the society will be organising a bone marrow donation drive to recruit 400 to 500 new donors, about a sixth of the SMU business school’s population.

Prior to this, the society sought to raise awareness on the process of donation and dispel misconceptions at

its annual fashion show cum charity event, Slightly Scarlet.

Held on Saturday, the event included a segment where representatives from the BMDP shared about bone marrow donation, which could save the lives of patients suffering from terminal blood-related diseases. Audiences at the sold-out fashion event could also visit an information booth on the issue.

“There’s only so much that money can do, and we wanted to do something more meaningful, where youths in our age group can add value that no one else can,” said undergraduate T Pirakash, 24, President of the SMU Business Society.

According to the BMDP — which has been focusing its efforts on recruiting donors aged 18 to 35 — youths tend to continue donating for a longer time, all the way till the maximum donor age of 60.

They also have stronger stem cells that graft and grow faster, raising chances of transplant success. Currently, 65 per cent of the donor register



Posters at the Slightly Scarlet event on Saturday. A lack of awareness is one of the greatest challenges the BMDP faces. PHOTO: GAN CHIN BOON

100,000
IDEAL NUMBER OF BONE MARROW DONORS ON REGISTRY. BUT THERE ARE ONLY 55,000 NAMES CURRENTLY, ACCORDING TO BMDP PRESIDENT



BMDP President Jane Prior said that contrary to the public image of bone marrow donation, it is, in fact, straightforward and painless. PHOTO: GAN CHIN BOON

in Singapore consists of young people.

“Young people seem far more altruistic, perhaps it’s the school environment,” said Ms Jane Prior, President of BMDP.

Last week, a separate donation drive organised by the BMDP at Raffles Institution garnered 600 sign-ups, a significant portion of the about-2,500-strong school.

Still, in total, there are only 55,000 names on the registry, when ideally there should be 100,000, said Ms Prior. With 50 patients on the waiting list at any one time and 25 new patients every day — coupled with the fact that chances of a match are about one in 20,000 — there is an urgent need to grow the donor pool.

The pull-out rate is 40 per cent. While it is “considered low” because some donors signed up 20 years ago and the BMDP did not have “emails (or a) e-newsletter to keep their loyalty with us”, Ms Prior noted that no one has pulled out due to medical issues.

She said: “It’s important that you know what you’re signing up for, rather than signing up and changing your mind after, because that is, from the pa-

tient’s perspective, a death sentence”.

A lack of awareness is one of the greatest challenges the BMDP faces. The public image of bone marrow donation is one of a “highly invasive, painful, potentially life-threatening” procedure, when it is, in fact, straightforward and painless, said Ms Prior. This is especially since bone marrow samples are no longer required upon registration, and just a cheek swab is needed for DNA testing.

“Bone marrow donation is one issue that a vast majority of people have misconceptions of, so we thought this is one area where we can really raise awareness to change things,” Mr Pirakash said.

For Ms Sofiana Seow — a member of the Slightly Scarlet organising committee — not signing up was out of the question.

“If I had the chance to save someone’s life, I don’t think I can live with not doing so,” she said. “As a donor, at most I’ll take two days to recover, and then I can go back to normal life, so there’s no reason for me not to do it.”

“Even if we manage to save just one life, this will be worth it,” Mr Pirakash added.

*** DONATION METHODS**

- Any individual aged 18 to 49 is eligible to donate his or her bone marrow. Just a cheek swab is needed to establish your tissue type upon registration. Donation can be done via two methods:
 - A needle is injected into the pelvic bone to retrieve the bone marrow while the donor is under general anaesthesia
 - The donor is injected with a hormone to stimulate overproduction of the bone marrow three days prior to donation, after which stem cells produced are acquired over five to seven hours in a process similar to blood transfusion.
- For more information, visit bmdp.org or call 6327 1344.