Media Release

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BONE MARROW TRANSPLANTS PASS 1000TH MILESTONE AT ROYAL NORTH SHORE HOSPITAL

More than 1000 patients have now received a bone marrow transplant at Royal North Shore Hospital (RNSH).

Since 1989, patients with blood cancers have been able to receive a bone marrow transplant at RNSH, whether using their own bone marrow or blood stem cells or cells from a matched donor.

In 1989, bone marrow transplants were seen as a novel treatment for blood cancers. Since then, the Bone Marrow Transplant Service has grown and is now an integral part of the way care is delivered to patients with blood cancers or blood disorders.

At 40 years of age, Coonabarabran farmer Allan Deans was the seventh patient to have a bone marrow transplant at RNSH on 8 June 1989. He was diagnosed with myeloma (cancer of the plasma cells) after noticing some abnormal symptoms such as stomach cramps.

“I remember the day I was diagnosed. I had done some blood tests on the Thursday, and the results were due on Saturday. When Saturday came around I felt lousy and could barely get out of bed. Nonetheless, I got on my horse and started to work. Next thing I knew, my wife rushed to the paddock in her car, yelling at me to get off my horse. She had received my blood results by phone which indicated I had myeloma (cancer of the plasma cells). I immediately went to Sydney to start treatment at RNSH,” recalled Allan.

“I had a young family at the time – a wife, nine year old daughter and two sons, aged six and three. I was determined to beat my diagnosis and I responded well to all treatment while I was in hospital,” said Allan.

By September, Allan was in remission, with the help of his brother’s donated bone marrow for the transplant. He returned home to his farm in in Coonabarabran which he still runs today with his family.

The use of bone marrow transplants, and the types of patients who can benefit from the procedure, has evolved over the last 26 years, and Dr Matthew Greenwood, Director of the Stem Cell Transplant Program at RNSH, says this has enabled the service to expand over time.

“We can now generally offer transplants to patients up to the age of 70, allowing more patients to benefit from the procedure. However, transplants can still be a risky procedure and may not be the best option for some patients.”

“At RNSH we have a state-of-the-art ward that has been designed to meet the needs of patients having a bone marrow transplant. We also specialise in transplants for outpatients, so that patients can return home on the day of their chemotherapy and stem cell infusion, and then be admitted to hospital a few days later when inpatient care is required. In some circumstances, transplants can even be undertaken entirely in the outpatient setting,” said Dr Greenwood.

Catherine Dunn, a singing teacher from Roseville, was recently the 1001st patient to have a bone marrow transplant at RNSH. Catherine was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia (a type of blood cancer characterised by an overproduction of immature white blood cells) in January 2015 and by May 2015, Catherine had received a blood stem cell donation from her brother. “I was told that there is a one in four chance that my siblings would be able to donate for my bone marrow transplant. Luckily, I have four siblings, and my brother was a perfect match.”

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Catherine's diagnosis came as a shock and was discovered when she tried to make a routine plasma donation at her local Red Cross Donor Centre. Catherine's blood was tested before her blood donation which revealed a low haemoglobin count, and while Red Cross staff were not able to take her donation, they did encourage Catherine to see her doctor. After three weeks in hospital following her bone marrow transplant, Catherine is now on the road to recovery, and hopes to return to teaching singing again next year.

Dr Greenwood wants to inform the community that donating stem cells is now easier than before and is less invasive. Most commonly, donors are required to attend an Apheresis Centre. Apheresis is a process of collecting blood from a vein in one arm and passing it through a cell separator machine, which collects the cells that are needed for the transplant. The remaining blood is returned to you through a vein in your other arm. The procedure does not require a general anaesthetic and takes approximately three to four hours.

"Blood stem cells are now commonly obtained from the bloodstream, unlike in the past, where they could only be obtained from bone marrow. This new method makes the process much simpler for the donor."

"Catherine was able to receive a blood stem cell donation from a family member, but a lot of patients rely on people in the community volunteering to donate their blood or bone marrow stem cells. I encourage our community members to join the Australian Bone Marrow Donor Registry. By registering to be a donor, you are giving a patient with leukaemia or a fatal blood disorder the possibility of a cure," said Dr Greenwood.

Information about the Australian Bone Marrow Donor Registry can be found online: http://www.abmdr.org.au/

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