

Have marrow, will travel

Ex-Mountie delivers difference between life and death

DONNA CASEY
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If you see Gary Walkling on a plane, the golf shirt and relaxed look might be the giveaway that he's a retired grandfather — and you'd be right.

As the flight attendant pushes the beverage cart down the aisle, you might learn the 60-year-old Ottawa man spent his career as a RCMP officer.

As you're chatting, you might learn he's on a red-eye trip and you will spot the small drinks cooler resting by his feet.

Walkling won't let the cooler out of his sight on the flight and he will likely check his watch a few dozen times.

He's on a whirlwind trip that is literally about life and death.

In the cooler, medical pouches containing an orange-red fluid lay amid ice packs. It's bone marrow and as he peers out the plane's window, Walkling knows a patient is waiting for his delivery, for the package that is his last hope for survival.

Running out of time

Just more than a year ago, Walkling made that trip to Europe to pick up bone marrow for a young man who was running out of time.

By March 2008, Michael Petruch had already endured three rounds of chemotherapy for the leukemia he had been battling for five months.

He needed a bone marrow transplant and doctors at the Ottawa Hospital and the Canadian Blood Services' One Match stem cell and marrow network had found one for Petruch, now 22.

Due to privacy rules, the young Ottawa man didn't know who was donating the marrow or where it was coming from.

Last year, the hospital performed 95 bone marrow transplants between related family members. Another 25 patients received marrow from strangers, through a global registry, with recipients never knowing the identity or country of origin of the marrow donor.

But Michael Petruch's transplant was a first. For the first time in Canada, a trained volunteer — not a doctor, nurse or medical student — delivered the life-saving tissue.

The program to train couriers for the bone marrow pick-

ups was born out of necessity.

Since 1989 when the Ottawa Hospital started performing bone marrow transplants, a hospital nurse has done the global jetting to pick up the tissue harvested from unrelated donors.

The bulk of the pick-ups were done by Sheryl McDiarmid, the advance practice nurse with the hospital's blood and marrow transplant program.

By 2008, McDiarmid had travelled 400 times to Asia, Europe and North America. With the marrow having only a 72-hour shelf life after extraction from the donor, McDiarmid's trips were all about getting there and getting back, usually within 48 hours.

Enter the Bruce Denniston Bone Marrow Society.

The charity, based in Powell River, B.C., was founded in 1988 in memory of Denniston, a RCMP constable, who died of leukemia after receiving a bone marrow transplant from an unrelated donor.

Its Ottawa chapter raises money and awareness for the Canadian Blood Services' One Match unrelated bone marrow registry but McDiarmid wanted to recruit the charity — made up of mostly retired RCMP officers — to train some of its members as couriers for the time-sensitive medical cargo.

Walkling was the first Bruce Denniston courier to make the solo trip to pick up and bring back a bone marrow donation from Germany.

With the hospital arranging the flight and paperwork for his trip and one-night stay in Dresden, Walkling's job was simple — take an overnight flight, make contact in the morning with the German transplant centre and arrange for the pick-up.

But even the best-laid plans can go awry if a train runs late or a flight is cancelled.

"It all looks pretty easy but it's a pretty fastidious kind of work," said Dr. Lothar Huebsch, director of the blood and marrow transplant program at the Ottawa Hospital.

Expert travellers

Walkling and the 25 other Bruce Denniston couriers need to be expert travellers who can "hit the ground running" at international airports, said Huebsch.

"You have to be pretty calm, cool and collected and these guys do a pretty good job,"



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Gary Walkling, left, was specially trained as a bone marrow courier. The first recipient of his services was Michael Petruch, right.

said Huebsch of how Walkling and the Denniston couriers deal with customs, monitoring the bone marrow's temperature and getting tossed the odd left curve.

"If something goes wrong, the patient back here is long past the point of no return," said Huebsch. "You can't be screwing up. You can't be losing it on the airplane."

Brent MacDonald remembers sitting in an airport in southwestern U.S., nervously eyeing the departure board.

MacDonald, 63, was en route back to Ottawa with bone marrow stored in his cooler. The retired RCMP sergeant heard from airline staff that a thunderstorm in Chicago, his connection point,

could delay his trip home.

On any other day, a cancelled flight would be an annoying inconvenience but MacDonald knew he had to think fast to get a Plan B to get home as quickly as possible.

"I just sat tight for a bit," said MacDonald, who lives in Ottawa.

Back on schedule

His flight home wasn't cancelled and MacDonald landed back in Ottawa on schedule for the planned transplant.

After the trip's nerve-wracking moments, the delivery was almost anti-climactic, with MacDonald dropping off the blood product to the Ottawa Hospital's lab and later getting an e-mail a day later confirm-

ing the transplant had gone ahead.

"I was pleased. I had done what I was asked to do. I was an important cog in the machine," said MacDonald, who has been a bone marrow donor himself.

Petruch only knows his marrow came from a young woman. He met Walkling when the former Mountie delivered the blood product to the hospital.

Being the first trained courier delivery, there were photos snapped with RCMP officials and hospital staff.

Petruch remembers the day as one similar to ones before, partly due to the devastating chemo blasts he received to prepare for the transplant.

But for Walkling, a flood of feelings hit the seasoned cop as he watched nurses hook up the bone marrow pouch to Petruch's IV drip.

Twelve years earlier, the grandfather of three had been in the same place as the young man before his eyes. Walkling had survived colon cancer, along with enduring nine months of chemotherapy.

"I had a flashback. I could see where I was compared to what Michael was experiencing," recalls the retired sergeant.

"It's tough, it's hard and you need all you can pull together to bring you through that," said Walkling.

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