

ALERT

Berkeley Medical Center organizes donor drive in honor of cancer patient

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Mariah Jenkins doing a cheek swab to join the NMDP registry of blood stem cell donors.

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MARTINSBURG — WVU Medicine Berkeley Medical Center partnered with the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP) to host a donor drive for blood stem cells on Feb. 12. Volunteers step tables in the main lobby and took traveling snack carts around the hospital to raise awareness and encourage people to donate.

The drive was organized in honor of Charles Walker, a cancer patient that waited months to find a bone marrow donor. However, his donor backed out at the last minute. Though Walker has found a new match, Oncology Pharmacist Crystal Heise and the rest of the team that worked with Walker decided they wanted to do something special to support him and raise awareness about donating.

Heise explained that when it comes to donating blood stem cells, it's important that patients match someone with a similar ethnic background while also having a close Human Leukocyte Antigens (HLA) match. In addition to looking for donors between the ages 18 and 30, the donor pool is very narrow. The donor drive is designed to not only give people the opportunity to donate but also raise awareness and encourage more people to donate.

"A lot of people think that donating involves an invasive procedure," Heise said. "They think it's similar to donating an organ, but that's not the case. Some people also think they must donate bone marrow, but all it requires is a quick cheek swap to be added to the registry. Anyone can go online and buy a kit to do it themselves."

Jessie Pritchard, member recruitment coordinator with NMDP, visits universities and other organizations throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and West Virginia to help create a diverse registry that helps save lives across the country. She explained that even though someone is added to the registry, it doesn't mean they will be asked to donate. However, if they are, NMDP will help with any financial needs that might prevent them from giving their blood stem cells. Pritchard explained that the actual process is similar to donating blood. It involves five days of shots to boost blood stem cell production, then the donor sits in a comfy chair as a medical professional takes the cells.

"We make the process easy," Pritchard said. "I like to tell people that they don't have to be a medical professional to save a life."

Mariah Jenkins was one of the first people to line up to add herself to the donor registry. As a registered specialist at the hospital, it's her job to welcome cancer patients into the office and build relationships with them. It only took her a couple minutes to swab her cheeks and get registered so that someday if she matches someone, she can help save their life.

"I care a lot about the patients," Jenkins said. "If there is a way I can help them, I want to do what I can."

For more information on NMDP and what it takes to donate, visit <https://www.nmdp.org/>.

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