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Leukemia Patient Beats Odds and Appeals to Montreal and Toronto African Caribbean Communities For More Registrants to Hema-Quebec and OneMatch Registries

June 5, 2008 – Despite lack of knowledge among the general public and a shortage of potential bone marrow donors from diverse ethnic groups, a Montreal father of African Caribbean descent has found a match. Animation and technology writer and blogger Emru Townsend, 39, diagnosed with leukemia in mid-December, is married and the father of an eight-year-old son. He is appealing to Montreal's 188 000 black community members and the greater Toronto area's 345 000 black community members to learn more about being a bone marrow and stem cell donor to help patients of African and African Caribbean descent in Canada and around the world.

Healthy stem cells in the bone marrow are the basis for over 200 different types of cells in the body, including healthy blood cells. Finding a stem cell match requires having the right combination of matching human leukocyte antigens (HLAs) between donor and recipient. Siblings offer the highest possibility for a match but Townsend's only sister, Tamu, isn't a compatible donor. Anyone could be match, but the most likely match shares the same ethnic background as the patient.

“Of course I'm happy that I've been able to beat the odds so far. However, this doesn't make the issue any less urgent. Many more people need bone marrow transplants, and their chances of finding compatible donors will remain low unless more people step up and help increase their odds for survival,” Townsend said.

Part of the problem is people think a transplant is a risk to their own health and very painful due to overdramatization, confusion about donor experience versus recipient experience, and misconceptions that spread through word of mouth without the proper information. Donation is low-risk, rapid and never done when considered dangerous to the donor. Another popular misconception is that matches are usually found in the family. In fact, 70% will rely on a stranger to be on the registry when they are in need. If you are of European descent in Canada, you have a 75% chance of finding a match. If you are anyone else your chance is between 10-30%.

National and international bone marrow registries offer the best hope, but Townsend's chances are lower since blacks are underrepresented in bone marrow registries worldwide. No Caribbean countries maintain registries, so it is up to people of African Caribbean descent who live outside of the Caribbean to opt in to the pool of potential donors. As of March 31, 2008, 0.7% (1633 people) of the Canadian registry are of African descent. Due to less genetic variance, 1 in 500 Canadians of European descent should be on the registry. **One in ten Canadians with an African background need to come forward to create a viable donor pool: over 78 000 people.**

There are currently more than 500 active searches underway for Canadian patients needing a bone marrow transplant. Townsend's donor may still change their mind before his transplant. Even if his donor is committed, many other people are awaiting donors who register because they might match and decide that they want to save a complete stranger's life.

“So many people have helped, but they cannot stop because Emru is just one person. We have failed in a way, if he is matched and everyone stops talking on behalf of everyone else.,” said Emru's sister, Tamu.

Townsend and his family are asking all members of the public, particularly people from African, African Caribbean and other underrepresented ethnic communities, to seriously consider registering with the OneMatch Stem Cell and Marrow Network (www.onematch.ca) or with Héma-Québec Stem Cell Registry (www.hema-quebec.qc.ca). Registering and donating if contacted could help save Townsend's life, that of Angela Christopher (African Caribbean) in Ottawa, who will need one in the event of relapse, Carolyn Tam (Chinese) in Toronto, Chantelle Chornoby (Aboriginal) of Ilford, Manitoba, and of the many other patients waiting for a bone marrow or stem cell transplant. Registration is easy through OneMatch. Potential donors must complete an online questionnaire and perform a cheek swab with a kit that is sent to their home, which they mail back in a postage paid envelope.

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