

TAKING HEART

Singapore's bone marrow donor programme gifts S\$3.6m

By Shreedhee Sajeev

shreedhees@sph.com.sg

THE Bone Marrow Donor Programme (BMDP) has announced that it will fund the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's efforts in cellular therapy research and treatment to the tune of S\$3.6 million.

Cellular therapy treatment offers an alternative for patients with blood diseases – particularly for those who are at a high risk of not responding to chemotherapy and/or are likely to have relapses.

The donation was announced on Wednesday (Jul 19), at the celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of Singapore's only marrow donor registry, which helps to match patients needing stem-cell transplants with suitable donors.

BMDP told *The Business Times* that it operates on a cost-recovery basis for the services it provides its patients,

and that its operation is mainly funded by the public, mostly individuals, many of whom have been making regular donations for years.

A small percentage of the total funds received comes from corporates.

"We are fortunate that this generous giving is not only sufficient to fund our operation, but has also allowed us, over the years, to build up a relatively healthy reserve. We are therefore able to implement patient subsidy schemes to support our patients and, now, participate in cell therapy research," it said.

Charles Loh, chief executive of BMDP, said: "Engaging in this project is not only an extension of the charity's services to its patients, but is also a necessity, in order to remain at the forefront of medical innovation. We understand the vital impact it has on our donor registry and will continuously strive to enhance our ability to match

patients with suitable donors."

On Wednesday this week, the BMDP hosted an anniversary dinner at One Farrer Hotel to recognise its donors for their contributions, and to highlight the impact of the registry's work on the patients whose lives have been turned around following a successful transplant of bone marrow.

Desmond Tan, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office and deputy secretary-general of NTUC, the labour movement, was the guest of honour at the event, attended by 300 people.

In its 30-year history, the BMDP has grown the size of its registry to more than 120,000 potential donors in Singapore. It has helped more than 800 patients find a bone marrow match, with which they underwent their transplants.

The BMDP is an accredited registry of the World Marrow Donor Association, which comprises organisations and individuals who promote global

collaboration and best practices for the benefit of stem-cell donors and transplant patients.

The BMDP said that a key priority is to grow the marrow donor registry to 350,000, with proportionate representation by all ethnic groups.

Minister Tan, in his speech at the anniversary dinner, said: "I urge more Singaporeans to learn about BMDP's life-saving cause, and to join it in its mission by stepping forward as its ambassadors."

BMDP hopes that through the advocacy of marrow donors, support of corporate partners, educational roadshows and working with the media, it can grow its registry to an optimum size to raise the chances of a patient finding a match, and beating a blood disorder.

This is why, for such patients, the theme at Wednesday's dinner had particular resonance: "The Power of a Second Chance".