



By Claire Phillips LaxtonCorrespondent

Jun 16, 2015 at 1:18 PM

A local woman is poised to become only the fifth person ever to receive a stem cell transplant for rheumatoid arthritis.

A local woman is poised to become only the fifth person ever to receive a stem cell transplant for rheumatoid arthritis.

Cheryl Wright, 46, formerly of Ocala but now a resident of Dunnellon, has suffered the pain of rheumatoid arthritis for years. Her symptoms began when she was 16 and she was diagnosed at age 22.

According to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Disease, “Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is an inflammatory disease that causes pain, swelling, stiffness and loss of function in the joints. It occurs when the immune system, which normally defends the body from invading organisms, turns its attack against the membrane lining the joints.”

Wright’s condition is severe progressive rheumatoid arthritis, with a lot of joint damage, which has not responded to any FDA approved medicines. She was a candidate for bilateral elbow replacements and both of her hands were severely deformed.

“I went through a year of intensive hand therapy (very painful), and had custom splints made to help with my hand and wrist deformities, that I wore while I slept each night,” she said.

She has a local RA doctor and also consulted with two physicians at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville to seek relief from her pain.

As her condition worsened, she lost a lot of time away from her job as a phlebotomist.

“I fought hard to keep working, despite my increasing limitations, but without enough medications I would progress to a full cripple within a year,” she said. “I had it in my head that if I could just get a new immune system, this nightmare would go away and I could have my life back. I am in need of a stem cell transplant.”

Wright began six months of research “from how the biologics work to reading medical journals and publications,” she said.

The name Dr. Richard Burt kept popping up and she soon learned he is the pioneering doctor of stem cell transplants.

According to <http://www.nm.org>, Burt is the Chief of the Division of Immunotherapy, Department of Medicine, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, in Chicago. He pioneered the use of hematopoietic stem cells to treat autoimmune diseases.

“Not only had I found the one doctor in the USA who did this, but found the best doctor in the world,” Wright said.

Wright contacted Burt’s office, then flew to Chicago last year, where she also consulted with an allergist and rheumatologist at Northwestern.

“It was decided that I needed a stem cell transplant to erase my existing immune system to give me a new one,” Wright said.

Families are checked first for donor potential, but, typically, 70 percent are not a match. The doctors then can widen the search, as was the case with Wright after her brother proved to not be a suitable donor. She was recently notified that Burt has two perfectly matched cord blood units reserved for her. She expects to have the transplant in July. Beforehand, she will have three to five chemotherapy treatments to kill her autoimmune system.

Wright said Burt has done four stem cell transplants for RA and that all of those patients are all doing well, including Annie Ballantine, 32, of Chicago, who was diagnosed with RA at 18 months. She was Burt's fourth stem cell transplant, on Dec. 9, 2013, and also found him by doing personal research.

"Having a stem cell transplant was my last hope for a life with some normalcy, and the same is true for Cheryl. For me, the transplant has been life-changing," Ballantine said.

"The improvement in my symptoms was almost instantaneous. I started chemotherapy to prepare for the transplant, and just two days later I had absolutely no pain in my joints." Ballantine said. "Before the transplant, she said, I couldn't open a Ziplock bag or button a cardigan. Now, 18 months post-transplant, I am doing push-ups every morning."

"I am so excited for Cheryl and all of the possibilities that are in her future that is free from pain and suffering from rheumatoid arthritis," Ballantine added.

Wright said after she receives new stem cells, "the new cells won't know I'm sick. They will grow and divide into new healthy disease free cells."

The transplant is dangerous and costly. Wright's insurance approved \$150,000 for the transplant, barring complications, but there will be about \$50,000 in out-of-pocket costs as she will have to return to Chicago six months post-transplant, one year post-transplant, and once a year for five more years. In the meantime, Burt is setting her up with a follow-up physician at UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville.

"I believe this transplant will be a success, just as the ones before me. I have overcome so many obstacles and have beaten the odds that I know this is exactly where I need to be to get better," Wright said. "I have absolutely no doubts and while there is a chance I could die during the process, death does not scare me, living the rest of my life crippled in a constant state of pain terrifies me. What I'm trying to do is bring awareness and hope for a cure."

Never miss a story

Choose the plan that's right for you.
Digital access or digital and print delivery.