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HELPING JON HEAL: Jon Anda with friend Brigitte Older and a mountain of empty pill packets, reminders of the medication he has taken since being diagnosed with the autoimmune disease CIDP.

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On Saturday, the Nelson Mail reported on 50-year-old Jon Anda's struggle with chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (CIDP), a progressive, disabling autoimmune disease that destroys his peripheral nervous system.

Mr Anda's pre-transplant testing is due to start on January 11 at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital. It will cost him about NZ\$250,000 for the treatment, a caregiver, accommodation, food and airfares.

"I haven't had a bill from [the hospital] yet," he said.

"But I can't stand there on the 11th without the money being in their bank. They won't see you unless you have the cash."

A former pilot, Mr Anda was diagnosed with CIDP 18 months ago and suffers from numbness, spasms and jolts like electric shocks. He has spent much of his time since then on steroids and chemotherapy in an attempt to suppress his immune system.

However, his condition has worsened, and Mr Anda said the outlook for the rest of his life had made him so desperate that he had turned to the internet for a cure.

He found what he now hopes might be one – a stem-cell transplant with one of the the United States' top doctors, autoimmune specialist Richard Burt, at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Mr Anda understands no other New Zealander has had the treatment for his condition, which only a handful of people worldwide have received.

Mr Anda said life was a flurry of organisation: finding a caregiver for his time there, finding money, booking airfares, accommodation and organising pre-treatment.

"I'm too busy to be sick and I've never been busier than when I was sick," he joked.

"I just want to put this behind me if it works. Part of me is resigned to the fact that it might not. I hope the operation works for me, because it can kill you. There is a small chance that I might die."

His treatment will involve harvesting immune stem cells from his bone marrow, killing his immune system with chemotherapy and then transplanting the patient's stem cells back into his body, "resetting" his immune system to what it was on the day he was born.

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friend's home, living on an invalid's benefit.

However, he isn't asking for donations. Instead, he plans to borrow "a lot of money in a few days" from family and friends, and said he would spend the rest of his life "paying it back and paying it forward". The day before he is scheduled to leave, he will auction part of his Motueka property to fund the transplant.

Mr Anda said it was "sad" that the New Zealand Government didn't fund the stem-cell transplant, when he had been prescribed tens of thousands of dollars' of chemotherapy drugs since he had become ill, and would require "millions more in pills and treatment" if he lived with his disease for another 20 years.

He recalled a period of five days, during which he had taken enough drugs "that cost the same as a small, brand-new car every day, and it didn't work," he said.

"Last year, I cost taxpayers \$250,000. If [the transplant] works, I'll come off the benefit, find a job and pay the taxpayer back."

Fundraisers will be at this weekend's Saturday market collecting for Mr Anda. Organiser Brigitte Older is looking for volunteers. Phone her on 027 3746875.

A Facebook group, Help Jon Heal, has also been set up. Donations towards Mr Anda's treatment can be made to Motueka's Fletcher Vautier Moore's Trust Account, Westpac Nelson branch, 030703001820704, reference 10248.5.

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