



PHOTOS COURTESY CINDY FINCHAM

Ria Fincham, also shown below, is undergoing treatment at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center for neuromyelitis optica, a rare autoimmune disease.

Ria Fincham hopes stem cell transplant could be her cure

By **SARA BUSH**

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Ria Fincham's goals for her future have changed drastically over the past few years.

While she once dreamed of getting her degree from the UCLA, she now lies in a hospital bed at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, praying that she may someday be cured of the crippling, and rare disease, neuromyelitis optica, also known as Devic's disease.

Doctors diagnosed the 28-year-old with the autoimmune disorder in September 2012, following weeks of tests and failed treatments.

Like multiple sclerosis, NMO affects the central nervous system, including the optic nerves and spinal cord.

In Ms. Fincham's case, it caused temporary blindness and paralysis of nearly her entire body. She still has the use of her neck and left arm and hand.

At first, her symptoms included headaches and muscle pain which she chalked up to stress. She had

been working 10 hour days in an effort to save money for school to become a respiratory therapist.

She woke up one morning with a blinding headache and unable to move.

"It progressed so quickly," Ria recalled. "I remember laying on the bathroom floor crying."

Her mother, Cindy Fincham, rushed her to the hospital and didn't leave her side until doctors were able to figure out exactly what they were dealing with.

"My mom got in bed and held me like I was 5 again," Ria said. "I thought I was going to die."

Doctors sent Ria home after treating her symptoms, but she had another attack two weeks later that put her into a coma.

She went through a series of tests and neurologists thought she could have multiple sclerosis or meningitis, but were still not certain.

Once again, Ria's mother fought. She said she got into yelling matches with local doctors and demanded that her daughter be moved to UCLA

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for further treatment.

"I thought, 'My daughter's going to die if I don't do something,'" she explained.

Even at UCLA, doctors had a hard time pinpointing what was causing her daughter's attacks.

"She was misdiagnosed five or six times," Cindy Fincham said. "Without a diagnosis, how can you treat the disease?"

There is no cure for NMO, but there are experimental treatments, including stem cell transplant therapy, that have had promising results.

Ria hopes she may be a candidate for such treatment and wants to raise enough money to consult with Dr. Richard Burt, a leader in the studies at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago.

The Division of Immunotherapy and Autoimmune Diseases is the only place in the world devoted to researching stem cell transplantation, according to its website.

The procedure has been used to treat patients with NMO, MS, lupus, Crohn's disease, and other autoimmune diseases.

Without help, Ria's doctor said she will likely have more attacks.

"Persons with NMO will tend to have more attacks and incur more neurologic disability without treatment," said Dr. Barbara Giesser, who is treating Ria at UCLA.

Just hours after her interview with the News-Press, Ria's mother had to rush her to the medical center's emergency room, once again, for treatment of a serious infection resulting from the immune-

suppressing drugs she is taking to help control her disease.

Ria worries that one of these infections could kill her before she has a chance to undergo a stem cell transplant.

"I feel like I have a death sentence hanging over me," she said. "Sometimes I can't close my eyes at night because I'm so afraid if I have another attack, and I won't make it, or I'll be a vegetable."

She is aware that she may never walk again or bear children.

Dr. Giesser has encouraged Ria to take her health into own hands and pursue experimental treatment.

"Stem cell therapy for persons with demyelinating diseases such as MS and NMO is still highly experimental, but we are hopeful that this treatment will someday be proven safe and effective in helping to repair nerve damage in persons with these conditions," she told the News-Press.

While she does have insurance, Ria said it does not cover such experimental procedures.

A fundraising site has been set up to help her raise \$50,000 for treatment.

Ria hopes that her story might raise awareness of her disease and help others suffering from NMO and related autoimmune diseases.

For more information on how you can help or to donate to the cause, go to <https://helphopelive.org/campaign/4594>

To learn more about Dr. Burt and the Division of Immunotherapy and Autoimmune Diseases, go to <http://www.stemcell-immunotherapy.com>

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