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UCT GSB Library on a mission to increase pool of blood stem cell donors

The University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) Library is on a mission to increase the pool of blood stem cell (bone marrow) donors in South Africa and lend a hand in the global fight against blood cancers.

To get started, the library partnered with DKMS Africa – a non-profit organisation dedicated to fighting blood cancers and improving the survival rate among patients with this group of diseases. The organisation’s goal is to recruit a continent-wide, ethnically diverse registry of donors committed to helping anyone in need of a life-saving transplant.

After much thought, UCT GSB library manager, Mary Lister, said she requested that DKMS Africa provide the library with a batch of swab kits. And since September 2023 the library team has been encouraging students and staff to get swabbed – the first, significant step in the stem cell donor registration process.

“It didn’t take much convincing. DKMS Africa were enthusiastic about the idea because they’re always looking at ways to get into communities to promote awareness on stem cell donation and to ultimately increase the number of stem cell donors on the registry,” Lister said.

It’s simple to swab

The swabbing process is very straightforward. Potential donors are requested to answer a simple medical questionnaire first that will help the team to establish whether they are healthy enough to donate their blood stem cells. Thereafter, the swabbing process can start. And that’s simple too: donors need to swab the inside of their cheeks and the mouth using three different swabs, repackage each swab, and a courier will collect it within a few days.

Thereafter, the analysis process starts. Each swab is analysed to determine the potential donor’s human leukocyte antigens (HLA) characteristics. And the donor’s HLA need to be as close to the patient’s as possible in order to be considered as a match. After the DKMS Africa team has analysed the samples and it fits their eligibility criteria, the donor’s information is loaded onto the registry, and they will then be available to patients searching for a donor.

“South Africa has an incredibly diverse population, yet a very small number of people are on the registry. We need to change this and the only way we can do that is by encouraging people in our circles to get registered. And if they’re unable to because they’re not healthy enough, pay it forward and find someone who can. We can make a difference together,” Lister said.

Honouring an ‘extraordinary’ colleague

But how did Lister become so passionate about raising awareness on this group of diseases? It all started in 2016 when her colleague Kate Hunter, a former UCT GSB Library manager was diagnosed with myelofibrosis – an uncommon type of bone marrow cancer that disrupts the body’s production of blood cells. Hunter died that same year.

“We all thought that she would be back within a few months, but she never returned because a suitable donor match was not found in time to save her life,” Lister said. “Kate was a wonderful colleague, a good friend to so many of us, and just an exceptional human being. There are so many like her out there who were not given a second chance at life. And we can change that by championing this cause.”

Since Hunter’s death and in her honour, Lister has used Sunflower Day – observed annually in September to create awareness around blood cancers – to spread the word. And to show their support, the library even sold Tubes of Hope – an affordable, multipurpose item of clothing that can be worn as a headband, scarf or arm band. All proceeds went towards raising awareness around this group of diseases.

But Lister always wanted to do more and said she was thrilled when DKMS Africa welcomed her new idea. Now her focus has changed slightly, but her end goal remains firmly intact: to get as many donors onto the registry as possible. Her dream, she added, is for all eligible UCT GSB students and staff to register as donors to save someone’s life. She’s also committed to debunking myths about the stem cell donation process.

“There’s no invasive surgery involved in the donation process; no drilling in bones or anything like that. It’s like donating blood. Imagine the difference we’d make if all students and staff on campus got involved in this? UCT has such diversity in its community. It would make a monumental difference on the registry, and we would be saving many lives,” she said.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News

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