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Two young Mumbai donors save 2 patients from outside who needed bone marrow transplant

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MUMBAI: Almost two years after a potential donor from the city backed off from donating stem cells to Stanford University professor Nalini Ambady who was suffering from leukemia, the city has made an appearance on the world map of unrelated bone marrow donors.

Unable to receive a bone marrow transplant, Ambady had died in October 2013. Two other patients, also from outside Mumbai, proved luckier as two city youngsters donated stem cells for them. A leukemia patient received the transplant in August 2014 and is winning against the disease. So is a thalassaemia patient, who got the stem cells in April 2015.

The Marrow Donor Registry of India, an NGO facilitating the voluntary donor-recipient interfaces, has more happy news: it has registered over 25,000 unrelated donors between 2009 and 2015.

MDRI found nine 100% matches for patients. Two resulted in successful transplants, three donors refused after initially signing up, three are pending and one patient is no longer interested in transplant anymore.

The registry, initially housed in Tata Memorial Hospital, Parel, has moved to S L Raheja Hospital in Mahim.

The figure of nine 100% matches has made MDRI doctors hopeful. "If you look at statistics from some of the developed countries, the ratio for a full match is approximately 1:10,000 to 1:20,000. If we compare ours with a database of 25,000 donors, we have managed to find nine full matches, which gives us a ratio in the range of 1:1,000-3,000," said Dr Navin Khattry, medical oncologist from Tata Memorial and general secretary, MDRI.

In essence, this means India can find more matches in a smaller pool of donors. "The key reason for better unrelated donor match ratio is that India is genetically more homogenous when compared to other countries," said Khattry.

Getting an unrelated match within India is a big plus for patients. The entire process could cost between Rs 5 and 8 lakh; getting a foreign donor can push up the cost to Rs 50 lakh.

However, bone marrow transplant is not simple in India. "There are certain problems that we faced when we started and some we continue to face," said haematologist Dr Sunil Parekh, founding chairman of MDRI. He rued the lack of awareness in donating marrow and the tendency of dropouts. "Dropout rates before transplants remain a major challenge for registries worldwide. Funding, too, is a concern," added Parekh.

India has two more active registries: DATRI in Chennai and Bharat Stem Cell Registry in Delhi. DATRI has 80,000 donors and has coordinated 80 transplants.