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Despite a donor being found, Laura Hillier's stem cell transplant cannot proceed because of the lack of specialized beds. | **photo submitted**

Agonizing wait

Stem cell donor found for teen but transplant can't proceed due to lack of specialized beds

by Kathy Yanchus
Burlington Post Staff

The Hillier family did not have much time to celebrate the happy news that a stem cell donor had been found for their 18-year-old daughter Laura, who is in desperate need of one in her battle against leukemia.

The good news was followed by the disturbing revelation that doctors cannot proceed with the transplant because of a lack of transplant beds not just at Juravinski Cancer Centre — where Laura is a patient — but in the province.

"Patients are required to be kept in remission while they are waiting for a transplant bed and must be given unnecessary consolidation round(s) of chemotherapy treatment while they wait," said Laura's mother, Frances, who stays at Juravinski with her daughter.

This is "cruel, inhumane and potentially deadly for the patients," said Frances, who has written a heartfelt

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Teen's mother writes letter to health officials

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letter to Dr. Michael Sherar, president and CEO of Cancer Care Ontario (CCO), with copies to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, Ontario Minister of Health and Long-Term Care Dr. Eric Hoskins and a number of other officials.

Laura has already undergone chemotherapy since her cancer returned last month, to put her into remission, as doctors prepare her body for the stem cell transplant. Instead of proceeding with the transplant, which involves further intense eradication chemotherapy and full body radiation, doctors have told the family that Laura must now undergo further rounds of chemotherapy to keep her in remission because of the lack of transplant beds, said Frances.

"I was told there is no medical reason for Laura to be treated further with consolidation rounds of chemotherapy; it is only because there is a waiting list."

Five allogeneic stem cell transplants — where the donor is unrelated — per month is standard at Juravinski Cancer Centre, occasionally there will be six, said Dr. Ralph Meyer, president and CEO of Juravinski Hospital and Cancer Centre.

Juravinski is one of three hospitals in the province — Ottawa and Princess Margaret being the other two — that perform such transplants.

Juravinski and Ottawa perform approximately the same number while PM performs more, said Meyer.

Currently there are between 30 and 35 patients on the "so called" (waiting) list, patients who are in various stages of treatment with the "expectation that a transplant is the very likely treatment intervention that will occur," said Meyer.

Both Meyer and Dr. Robin McLeod, vice-president, Clinical Programs and Quality Initiatives at Cancer Care Ontario, agree there are pressures on the system.

"The reason why these pressures have come to exist actually represents a success in the transplant program in terms of the medical advances that make this treatment safer," said Meyer.

"Our wait times are a bit longer than what our target is, but having said that, all patients who need transplants do receive them here (in Ontario)," said McLeod. "We do not have to send any patients out of country and in fact, our outcomes are as good as, or similar, to other international jurisdictions so we provide

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Number of transplants has more than doubled in last five years at Juravinski: Meyer

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very good care to patients and patients do well following stem cell transplants."

Once a donor has been identified for an allogeneic transplant and the patient is ready to begin the process, the target transplant wait time is six weeks, according to CCO.

McLeod said she is empathetic to the Hillier family's situation and the concern about wait times. "Our goal is to make sure that care is done within our wait times."

Over the past decade, transplanting has become a much safer procedure and although the treatment is still involved and comes with substantial risks, the increase in its safety has widened the patient base, said Meyer.

The number of transplants from unrelated donors has more than doubled in the last five years at Juravinski, so the system is strained, said Meyer.

Of the 35 beds in Juravinski's hematology ward, six are designed for patients receiving allogeneic stem cell transplants.

"When a person undergoes that type of transplant, their immune systems are very compromised and they are susceptible to some serious infections. Rooms have to have a special filtration system; it's a positive airflow where the pressure of air inside the room is greater than outside the room so that no airborne bacteria are drawn into the room," explained Meyer.

Limited beds are but one factor in a system under strain; the availability of hematologists, who are specially trained in transplant, is another issue, said Meyer.

"The overall healthcare funding to support the transplant program is potentially an issue if the other items were addressed," said Meyer.

"At Juravinski there is a whole ward and program dedicated to this and this is a highly-scrutinized and highly-organized program where these sorts of stresses are recognized and are part of our day-to-day activities of overseeing the care we provide.

"And similarly, at CCO there has been a lot of work done particularly over the last three years, including the last six months, to address the needs of the patients in the province because of the increased feasibility of providing this treatment, and the fact that there is a rising disease burden and rising need to provide the treatment."

There are also more cases of blood cancers, partly because of the growth of Ontario's population, but also because of the fact that some of these diseases are associated with aging and the population is aging, said Meyer.

"With the number of patients we have, the

see Number on p. 24

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Number of transplant candidates has risen

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number of variables that exist with each patient, the timing and where people stand on that list, the system can be in a state of flux. There's a whole oversight of that process that is rigorously monitored by members of the team from the transplant program."

The high number of transplant patients is not unique to Ontario; other provinces are experiencing increases as well, said McLeod.

Volumes in the number of candidates for stem cell transplantation have dramatically increased in the last 6-12 months, said McLeod.

"It probably would be difficult to send patients out of province to another province….sometimes we will transfer a patient to a different hospital but we've not had to transfer a patient outside of Ontario for a number of years. That is a possibility but I do not think that we have to do that.

"Obviously this is of concern to us," continued McLeod. "We want our healthcare system and particularly our cancer system, to be the best in the world so we will do everything we can to make it that way."

Depending on her blood counts, the Nelson High School graduate is expected to undergo a bone marrow biopsy within the next couple of weeks to ensure she is in remission before the next stage of treatment begins. There is the possibility Laura may come home for a week with family — which includes dad Greg and 12-year-old sister Heather — before undergoing more chemotherapy.

"I am concerned that the longer she waits for transplant, the higher the risk of relapse, which would likely be fatal. Her doctor has confirmed that this fear is correct," said Frances.

Police continue to search for seven on list

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• Week 6 – Michael Ramsay turned himself in on June 19 as a result of media attention.

• Week 8 – Jessica Haynes was located and arrested on June 29 as a result of information received after a press release was issued.

• Week 10 – Brennan Bowley turned himself into Hamilton police on July 3 as a result of collaborative efforts of the Hamilton and Halton police services, and pressure from media attention.

Halton police continue to search for seven wanted people on the Fugitive Friday list:

• Week 1 – Raymond French (http://bit.ly/1Uskqhn)

• Week 3 – Kenneth Moodie (http://bit.ly/1G37ljH)

• Week 7 - Milan Suchy and Blanka Dolezalova (http://bit.ly/1Hb0BEq)

• Week 8 – Sean Kelly (http://bit.ly/1M7PsVV)

• Week 9 – Bryon Bullied (http://bit.ly/1fhlwN2)

• Week 11 – Corey Rodgers (http://goo.gl/kkhsOm)

Anyone with information about the wanted individuals can contact Det.-Const. Calvin Bulbrook of the Burlington Offender Management Unit at 905-634-1831, ext. 2346. Anonymous tips can be left with Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS), through the Web at www.haltoncrimestoppers.com or by texting Tip201 with your message to 274637 (crimes).

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