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Can Singaporeans be idealistic?

In the first of a new monthly series on Small Ideas that can change Singapore, the writer shares his feelings on hearing that his daughter donated her bone marrow to a stranger.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

WHEN I was a student studying in the Bukit Timah campus of what is now the National University of Singapore in the late 1960s, if anyone had approached me and asked me to become a bone marrow donor, I would have politely demurred.

Why? My pain threshold was not very high. All I knew about bone marrow donations was that they were very painful because a big needle had to be inserted into your bone to extract the bone marrow.

Against this backdrop, you can imagine my shock when my daughter casually informed us at dinner in October last year that she was going to donate her bone marrow to an anonymous patient somewhere in the world.

My jaw dropped. As a Singaporean parent, I asked myself the obvious kiasu (afraid to lose) question: "Why is my daughter going to incur pain and risk her health to save an anonymous patient she may never meet in her life?"

At the same time, I knew that I could not dissuade my daughter. She has a strong will and nothing deters her when she has made up her mind. Instead of trying to dissuade her, I tried to find out more.

The first question I asked was why she had signed up to become a bone marrow donor. She told me that when she enrolled as a freshman in Yale in 2007, the students were encouraged to sign up as bone marrow donors.

This is one of the great strengths of the leading American universities - they do their best to reinforce and strengthen the idealistic spirit of young university students, instead of trying to snuff it out.

Several years passed. Then out of the blue, seven years after she signed up, the bone marrow registry in the United States told her that her bone marrow was a perfect match for a leukaemia patient somewhere in the world. Subsequent tests by the Singapore Bone Marrow Donor Programme (BMDP) confirmed this.

I was worried that my daughter would experience great pain as a donor. I was therefore relieved when I learnt that there is now an easier and relatively painless method of extracting bone marrow.

The old method of inserting a needle into a bone is still carried out, usually for about one in 10 donations. Some donors continue to opt for this method as they see it as a one-off, faster operation, which is less disruptive to their work.

Afterwards, the general comment from most donors is that the procedure is not painful, although some say they experience a dull backache which lasts no longer than two to three days.

I was relieved when my daughter chose the alternative method of having a stem cell harvest. All she had to do was lie in a hospital bed for several hours while her blood was circulated through a machine.

While her blood went through this machine, her stem cells were extracted. So the whole procedure took longer than the old method. She also had to take some medication for the few days before, to stimulate the production of stem cells.

All in all, my daughter suffered only some discomfort. When she took the medication, she felt some aches. Also, after the stem cell harvest, she felt a little weak for a few days. But she quickly returned to

her good health.

This is an important point worth emphasising in this article.

Apparently, some Singaporeans are reluctant to enlist as bone marrow donors because of some false beliefs in our society.

Some men believe that donating bone marrow will rob them of their manhood. Some women believe that they will remain "weak" for the rest of their lives after donating bone marrow.

Ms Jane Prior, honorary president of the BMDP, says "it is hard to change minds that are set in self-appointed misinformation".

This is why I am writing this article about my daughter's experience: to help expel and kill the many false beliefs that surround the BMDP.

With modern technology, we have now developed a relatively easy and painless way of saving people's lives. And I am not exaggerating here - this is truly a life-and-death matter.

The moral choice is clear: If we can find a relatively easy and painless way of saving someone's life, shouldn't we all do so?

This is why our junior colleges, polytechnics, Institute of Technical Education and universities should support strong programmes to persuade our young people to sign up for the BMDP.

I now wish I had done so as a young student. Since I am over 50, I am now, unfortunately, too old to qualify as a donor, who has to be aged between 18 and 49. Those who wish to do so should go to bmdp.org

The paradox here is that when young people sign up to save someone else's life, they may be saving their own lives as well.

Many Singaporeans believe that the best way to improve their sense of well-being is through getting more of the material five "C"s: car, cash, condominium, country club and credit card.

Actually, the best way to improve one's sense of well-being is to be more altruistic and help others, especially by saving a life.

In a society that is sometimes struggling to find its meaning and its soul, the more people seize opportunities - like the BMDP - to give of themselves, the happier our community will be, with a greater sense of self-esteem.

None of this is really new. For thousands of years, ancient wisdom has taught us that it is better to give than to receive.

In the past three years, the Singapore BMDP has recruited 19,000 new donors. Its board has set a target of recruiting 50,000 donors in celebration of Singapore's 50th anniversary this year.

Since we have a community of 3.3 million citizens and 527,700 permanent residents, is it asking too much for 50,000 new donors to sign up as we celebrate our 50th anniversary?

This is an easy way to give back to our society.

This is why this is my first "small" idea for 2015. After a year of writing a series of Big Ideas for 2014 based on ideals and concepts I think will guide Singapore through its next 50 years, I decided to focus my mind and columns for The Straits Times this year on "small ideas" with potentially big impact.

After all, our nation has come so far not just because of Great Men and Big Ideas, but also because of ordinary folk and small ideas that made a difference.

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