Bone Marrow Donation: Factors Influencing Intentions in African Americans

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A major obstacle confronting patients, nurses, other healthcare practitioners, and researchers involved with bone marrow transplantation is insufficient availability of bone marrow donors. The scarcity of donor availability is woefully problematic in the African American population, whose representation in the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP) is disproportionately low as compared to Caucasian counterparts. African Americans constitute 388,847 (8%) of prospective donors in the NMDP and only 645 (4%) of transplant recipients (NMDP, 1999).

The race and ethnicity of bone marrow donors play a significant role in determining the probability of matching and, consequently, of survival (Confer, 2001; Mori, Graves, Milford, & Beatty, 1996; Yancey, Coppo, & Kawanishi, 1997). According to Laver et al. (2001), Caucasian patients with leukemia, lymphoma, or other disorders treatable with transplantation have about an 80% chance of finding unrelated bone marrow donors by searching the NMDP registry. In contrast, African American patients find matches less than 30% of the time. Moreover, because some phenotypes are common among certain racial groups, human lymphocytic antigen (HLA) matching has become even more problematic with the increase of individuals with racial as well as mixed racial identities (Mori et al.).

Key Points . . .

➤ If racial disparity in the current healthcare environment in the United States is a reason for lower donation and transplant rates for African Americans, interventions should be designed to address issues of equity and trust in the U.S. healthcare system.

➤ Greater steps must be taken to increase bone marrow donor availability among African Americans. Given that education of patients and the lay community is integral to the role of nurses in hospitals, communities, and other settings, nurses are in an ideal position to impress upon African Americans the critical need for bone marrow donation and, while doing so, to encourage African Americans to become donors.

➤ To test new strategies to recruit African American donors, vigorous descriptive research on bone marrow donation in this population is a prerequisite for gaining knowledge of the intentions of African Americans regarding bone marrow donation, as well as an understanding of the barriers preventing African Americans from donating bone marrow.

➤ Patient education programs should be expanded to (a) provide explicit information regarding the matching process and the likelihood for African Americans to match other African Americans, (b) gather personal information about donor recipients so that potential donors can relate to the human side of donation, and (c) explain specific information about medical coverage, donor expenses, and resource issues.