

# March has been named multiple myeloma month

By FRANK L. MILLER

It seems like we are running out of months. There are so many causes and only a dozen months to go around, but it does help to focus attention on cultural phenomenon: January — National Blood Donor Month; February — Black History Month and health needs; March — Brain Injury Awareness Month and mental health needs; April — Stress Awareness Month (most likely related to tax filings on the 15th). Having a month in which to raise awareness not only benefits the general public, but individuals who might be directly affected by the disease or affliction of the month.

March is home for a number of causes, some having their own days; e.g. March 24 is World TB Day, March 22 The American Diabetes Association Alert Day, or March 20, World Oral Health Day. March is also the time to promote awareness of a little known disease that sadly is becoming more prevalent as it attacks more and more unsuspecting individuals of all ages and walks of life — multiple myeloma.

Multiple myeloma is a blood cancer and it attacks the blood where it is formed in the bone marrow. For those of us who forgot most of what we learned in tenth grade biology, we have three kinds of blood cells; white ones that fight infections in our bodies, red ones that carry carbon dioxide away from tissues and bring that much needed oxygen to them, and platelets which allow our blood to clot so we don't lose this precious fluid when we get cut. When germs attack, the white blood cells turn into plasma cells and head for the site of the infection. Unfortunately, for reasons still unknown, these plasma cells mutate into cancer cells that overtake the bone marrow. This prevents the white blood cells from functioning (weakening the immune system), weakening the bones severely leading to breaks, and even tumors. There is some evidence that there are environmental causes as many Viet Nam veterans exposed to Agent Orange have developed multiple myeloma.

MM has long been considered a terminal disease. Geraldine Ferraro, the attorney from New York who ran for vice president with Walter Mondale died with it at age 75; Elizabeth Edwards, married to presidential candidate John Edwards died with it at age 60, demonstrating that no matter how rich, how famous, how well-connected, the disease can kill you. A well-known and highly respected Talbot County citizen, Dr. Stephen K. Radis who devoted his life to the Talbot County

Health Department, founder of The Holly Center, College professor, Ph.D. in human development, avid athlete in basketball, baseball, golf, marathoner (22x), and tri-athlete (3x) was brought down by the disease at 67 this month.

Symptoms include fatigue, lower back pain, frequent infections, and broken bones. One member of my wife's support group broke her collar bone swimming. Most people put the symptoms off to the normal aging process or arthritis. My wife was diagnosed in her fifties after a routine bone scan to rule out osteoporosis. Her bones were so abnormally thinned, her primary physician referred her to an oncologist who diagnosed and monitored the progress of the disease. Unlike most cancers, you either have lung cancer or you don't, you either have breast cancer or you don't; Myeloma, like many blood cancers, tends to linger, or "smoulder" with minimal effect until it flares up into a full attack on the system. My wife was not treated until her cancer reached 40 percent. She is currently in remission five years post her bone marrow transplant.

Treatments include chemotherapy, steroids, radiation, targeted therapies, and stem cell transplants to reboot the bone marrow, killing everything with strong doses of chemotherapy and then infusing (replacing) your bone marrow with stem cells. Some patients use their own, others rely on donors. More recent approaches that have been highly successful have centered around immunomodulators, medications that stimulate the body's immune system to fight the cancer cells, also known as immunotherapy. These involve infusions (IV intravenous treatments) given on an outpatient basis at local clinics and physicians' offices.

Multiple myeloma left untreated kills. Treated, it not only prolongs life, but enhances the quality of life for patients. Don't ignore lower back pain, the cells tend to congregate in the larger bones. If in doubt, see your primary physician, diagnosis can be accomplished with simple blood tests, bone scans, or bone marrow biopsy. Diagnosis and treatment can not only save your life, but make it more worth living.

For more information about our local multiple myeloma support group, visit Chesapeake Multiple Myeloma Network at <http://chesapeake.support.myeloma.org> or email group leader Robert "Bob" Kelly at [kellyrt@lemoyne.edu](mailto:kellyrt@lemoyne.edu).

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