

# TOM'S STORY



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## It's what you know. Knowledge is king throughout the bone marrow donation process. Here's how information played a role in the decision making for communications professional turned donor Tom.

Saving someone's life isn't something most people will think about. It's hardly a topic that comes up in conversation and it's not a feat that will cross your mind until the chance to do so takes place.

Like so many others, I signed up for the ABMDR one day while donating blood. It was as simple as signing another form, and the phlebotomist taking an extra sample tube at the start of the donation.

At the time, I was dating a nursing student and it was something we'd both spoken about doing. I knew little about what was involved and had no particular reason for signing up, other than knowing that one day I might be able to help someone who needed it.

I knew nothing about the process, how the marrow was collected or what was involved. I'd heard rumours and speculation that it was painful and big needles were a feature but my approach was to cross that bridge when it came to it, not knowing if it ever would.

Years passed before anything came of my registration. I'd forgotten I'd ever signed up so when I got the phone call and the person on the other end said the words "from the Australian Bone Marrow Donor Registry..." my first thought was, 'Oh cool. So, you've got a raffle or something going on?'

Well, it turned out they did have one going on – only I was the prize. She went on to explain that I was a potential match for a patient and they'd like me to have another blood test.

I spoke to my family about the prospect of me donating bone marrow and it was met with mixed feelings. Some members were excited, some had reservations and others didn't know what to think. By now the concept was on the forefront of my mind, but there was still a chance I wouldn't be a match.

My family played a huge role in the decision-making process, as did the wonderful staff at ABMDR. Although there were some reservations, we kept thinking that if it was one of us who needed the transplant we'd donate. What if my nephews got sick and none of us were a match? Of course we'd want someone to give up their time and donate.

I knew that I needed to make a decision about whether I would go through with the donation if I was called up for it. The ABMDR website is a wealth of information. Between information sheets about the process, donor and recipient stories and the annual report, there are pages of answers to questions.

During the physical exam the nurse and the haematologist also explained everything and a catch up with the ABMDR coordinator also gave me the chance to ask further questions. Education is key and I would encourage anyone who gets the phone call to ask as many questions as you can think of. The more you know, the easier it is to make an informed decision.

In my independent research I stumbled across a video series about a patient who was fit and healthy before getting cancer. He was a similar age to me and needed a bone marrow transplant

and his videos documented the whole journey from when he was diagnosed to announcing he was cancer free. This really hit home and helped me realise what a few hours of my time could do.

One of the assumptions that the majority of people make is that a big needle in the hip is the only way to collect bone marrow. But the reality is that a lot of donations collected in Australia are done through apheresis – like mine.

The confirmation that I was the best suited donor was incredibly exciting and daunting.

It was a bit of a sleepless night ahead of the donation. My mind was working overtime and I couldn't get comfortable. I was nervous and excited. Just hours later I would be doing something that could help save a life. I knew nothing about the recipient other than he was an Aussie male, yet I felt so connected to him.

The apheresis method is pretty simple. You're given a hormone to boost stem cell production then you sit for a couple of hours on the machine to separate the stem cells from the circulating red cells. No more invasive than a plasma or platelets donation.

The donation day felt long. I arrived at the donation centre at 8am and the collection started. The whole process took around six hours and then I had a chance to have a good lunch while the all-important cell count took place. They needed more than 5 million but they managed to collect 7.5 million from me.

Anyone who has given blood will know there is an unexplainable buzz following a donation. When you donate bone marrow though, it's a whole new level, it's an incredible feeling. Some people think you're a hero – and in some ways, you are – but I didn't feel like it. I had just done something astonishing but I felt like it was nothing major. It was a sense of humble pride. I became invested in a total stranger and I find myself wondering how they are – even months later.

When I tell people about what I've done, their response is always "isn't that painful and invasive?" but when I explain the process they realise it's not as bad as they think.

I feel its misconceptions and a lack of information that prevents people from signing up to the ABMDR or going through with a donation, but we can all make a difference – even those who haven't donated.

Knowledge is power, and the knowledge my friends gained from my experience empowered them to sign up to the registry. It's a conversation all registered donors should have with their families and friends.

Joining the registry is just the first step of what could be a life-altering experience. Having donated, I can't fully explain how great it feels like to do so and if I should I get the call again in the future I would say yes in a heartbeat.