Health Awareness

Understanding Sickle Cell Disease

(NAPS)—Nearly 100,000 people in the U.S. are affected with sickle cell disease—maybe even someone you know—yet there's very little general awareness of the disease in part because it's mostly not visible. In addition, it affects each individual differently—symptoms and complications of the disease range from tolerable to severe.

One Family's Story

David Dandridge, Jr., was born with sickle cell disease but was not diagnosed until the age of two after suffering a pain crisis. The most common genetic blood disorder in the U.S., sickle cell disease can cause severe pain, tissue and organ damage, and even strokes. For patients battling the disease, regular blood transfusions are critical to managing extreme pain and life-threatening complications.

"Whenever I have received a blood transfusion, it was because it was a matter of life or death," said Dandridge. "That is very scary to think about."

When he was 18, the painful disease disrupted his dreams of joining the military and becoming a law enforcement officer, but he persevered past his pain and successfully completed college at Morgan State University and later University of Phoenix. He also became a proud member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., married his high school sweetheart and became a father.

Over the years, Dandridge received countless blood transfusions to treat pain, complications and multiple transient ischemic attacks (TIA), or mini strokes. Frequent transfusions can make finding compatible blood types more difficult when patients develop an immune response against blood from donors that is not closely matched to the blood of the recipient. Yet, 1 in 3 African American blood donors are a match for people with sickle cell disease—making the need for blood donors who are Black critical to the ongoing care of sickle cell warriors such as Dandridge.

"[When] my body rejects blood from the transfusions, [it] caus[es] the need for more blood," said Dandridge, who has type B positive blood. "Thank God, I have never been in a situation where I needed blood and it was not available. However, I have heard of occasions when blood transfusions were [postponed] due to a lack of blood donations."

In addition to his own need for compatible blood units, Dandridge also has to consider the transfusion needs of his

The Dandridge family, David Jr., Omowumnmi, Skylar, David III and Donovan, are all affected by sickle cell.

family. In 2007, while pregnant with their first child, his wife Omowunmi discovered she was a sickle cell trait carrier through prenatal testing. Though sickle cell trait carriers do not typically experience signs of sickle cell disease, they can pass the sickle cell gene on to their children. Due to the couple each having an abnormal hemoglobin S gene, their children would have a 50% chance of inheriting either sickle cell disease or sickle cell trait. For the Dandridge family, all three of their children—Skylar, David III and Donovan—were born with sickle cell disease.

Today, the Dandridge family know first-hand the importance of having access to a strong and diverse blood supply when they need it.

"My mind is always in overdrive [about the availability of blood] because sickle cell disease can impact the body of patients differently and at any time," he said.

What You Can Do

Dandridge often encourages those who are eligible to schedule an appointment to donate blood and for those on the fence, he believes a picture is worth a thousand words.

"I would show them pictures of my children as well as a picture of myself following the strokes and let them know that if it weren't for [blood] donations, I and others like myself would possibly die. Anyone who can give, please consider doing so. You never know whose life you may be saving."

How to Help

To schedule an appointment to give blood, visit RedCrossBlood.org/OurBlood or call 1-800-RED-CROSS (1-800-733-2767). As part of its Sickle Cell Initiative, the Red Cross is providing sickle cell trait screening on all blood donations from self-identified African American donors.