

The Lifesaving Potential of Cord Blood: Ryder McDermitt

At just 18 months old, Ryder McDermitt was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML), an adult form of leukemia that accounts for 15 to 20 percent of all cases of childhood leukemias. After relocating about 90 miles from home to Pittsburgh for several months, Ryder and his mother, Karrie, grappled with the reality of his cancer diagnosis. Thanks to a bone marrow transplant, Ryder has been in remission for about one year. According to Karrie, “There is no way I could have taken it [leukemia diagnosis and treatment] like Ryder did. If it weren’t for a cord blood donation, my son would not be here today.”

When Ryder experienced numerous ear infections, easy bruising, arm pain, and high fevers, the thought of a cancer diagnosis never crossed Karrie’s mind. After blood work confirmed Ryder had AML, he began the long road of cancer recovery at Children’s Hospital of UPMC of Pittsburgh.

June 11, 2007 marked Ryder’s cancer diagnosis date. For six months, he endured five rounds of chemotherapy. He went into remission in January 2008 only to face a relapse the following August. In September 2008, he endured more

chemotherapy and radiation treatments. “Ryder is not a little boy, but a little man. During treatment, Ryder had dressings on his chest around Broviac catheters, which are placed for administering drugs and transfusions and drawing blood samples. Twice a week, the dressings had to be painfully replaced and he would tell the nurses to just ‘rip them off at the same time’,” says Karrie.

The side effects of Ryder’s treatment ensued with a vengeance. He experienced high fevers, reaching 104 degrees at times, vomiting, diarrhea, and other flu-like symptoms. “Radiation therapy was the most difficult for Ryder to tolerate. He experienced the most side effects from that,” says Karrie.

Shortly after chemotherapy and radiation, Ryder underwent a bone marrow transplant. Dr. Rakesh Goyal, Ryder’s transplant doctor, was astounded that his cord blood donor, an anonymous little girl, was a rare six out of six match. According to Dr. Goyal, a six out of six match means that the patient and cord blood unit were matched at six places during tissue typing, which occurs about 10 percent of the time. “We are so thankful for the mother who donated cord blood to save my son’s life,” says Karrie.

After about one year, Ryder is in remission. Periodically, Ryder undergoes check-ups on all his organs because of their exposure to high levels of toxicity during his cancer treatment. It is possible he will face organ complications in the future. He also goes once a month for blood tests, and sometimes gets periodic intravenous immunoglobulin to



boost his immune system until his body can make it sufficiently on its own. This is administered through veins in his foot since they are the only “good” veins left.

Ryder loves sports and is very active, but he has gone to physical therapy. Since nearly half of his life has been spent in hospitals wearing slippers, not shoes, his feet slightly turn in toward his ankles causing knee pain; he will have to see an orthopedist. One side effect of cancer treatment is brittle bones, and in July 2009 Ryder broke the bone right above his elbow in half. He endured surgery the same day to correct it. “He gets out of breath and tires more easily now, but that is a small price to pay after what Ryder’s been through,” adds Karrie.

Karrie’s stepdaughter, Veronica, recently delivered a baby girl, and broke into tears after learning the hospital did not offer options for cord blood donation. “She is a young mother who wanted to save a life,” states Karrie.

Karrie is concerned women are not educated enough about their baby’s umbilical cord blood and its life-saving abilities. Donating cord blood poses no harm to the mother or baby because it is collected after the baby is delivered. “You’re bringing joy into the world, but you could also be bringing joy to someone in need.”