

Affinity through Stem Cells Donation

A Nurse's Role in Rejuvenating Life

By Lin Shuhuai, Ou Mingda, Li Hongwen, Xiao Biheng, Liu Chen-Chen



When she met Chang Hui-Ching, Huang An-Chih couldn't hold back her tears and expressed her gratitude.

The 61-year-old recipient, Huang An-Chih, hails from Taichung. Both her parents passed away from cancer before she turned 30 and married. After her marriage, she cared for her father-in-law as if he were her own father, earning widespread recognition in her community as a filial daughter-in-law. She even received an award for her exemplary filial piety.

At the age of 56, An-Chih was suddenly diagnosed with leukemia, leaving her life hanging by a thread. Fortunately, she matched with a marrow stem cells donor, a registered nurse Chang Hui-Ching from Hualien Tzu Chi Medical Center. Chang, who once worked in a stem cell transplant ward, deeply understood the hope leukemia patients and their families placed on transplants. Without hesitation, she agreed to donate, saying simply, “it’s the right thing to do!”

“I waited a long time to thank her in person for giving me a new life,” said An-Chih, a hematopoietic stem cell recipient, explaining the purpose of her reunion with her donor.

Doctors Value Patients’ Trust, Tzu Chi as a Platform for Altruism

The annual reunion at the Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center is the most anticipated event for both recipients and donors. The simple act of “that



Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center Director Yang Kuo-Liang(left) and Dr. Yeh Shih-Peng pose for a group photo.

one injection” creates a profound bond, making these reunions especially meaningful.

On the morning of October 7, 2023, the 30th Anniversary Reunion of the Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center was held at the Dharma Lecture Hall in Hualien. Dr. Yeh Shih-Peng, Director of Hematology and Oncology at China Medical University Hospital (CMUH), personally accompanied An-Chih and her family, who traveled from Taichung to Hualien to attend the event.

Taking the stage, Dr. Yeh Shih-Peng said, “My patients trust me enough to place their lives in my hands. For this, I can only say two words: ‘thank you.’” He added, “Everyone wants to save lives and help others. Tzu Chi is undoubtedly the best platform for infinite giving.”



Be Grateful for Dr. Yeh’s care and encouragement, An-Chih reflected, “Without his treatment and support, I might never have received that life-saving shot, and my family wouldn’t be standing on this stage today.”

When asked by the host if she ever imagined what her donor might look like, An-Chih replied, “I thought she might be a beautiful young girl still in school.” She had read a card from her donor with delicate and elegant handwriting, which said, “Wishing you a successful transplant, peace, and health...” The sentiment filled her with hope and expectation.

The audience watched as the camera panned across the hall, eventually focusing on a tall, young woman: Nurse Chang Hui-Ching. With nearly 27 years of nursing experience, Chang remarked, “My job is to fight for life every day.” She had long wished to save a life through donation but never dared to imagine meeting the recipient in person.

Illness Shakes the Family to Its Core

In 2016, while running a business with her husband in a traditional market, An-Chih began experiencing frequent dizziness, fatigue, and drowsiness. Visits to local clinics yielded no diagnosis, and her symptoms were dismissed as a common cold. However, her condition



Donor Ms. Chang Hui-Ching (fourth from the left) never imagined that she would have the chance to meet the recipient. She wanted to give the recipient a second chance to live and has the courage to pursue her dream.



Recipient Ms. Huang An-Chih expresses her thanks to Dr. Yeh Shih-Peng Hospital (first from the right), Director of the Hematology Oncology Department of the China Medical University, for his treatment.

worsened, with additional symptoms such as bleeding, pallor, weakness, and shortness of breath. After hospitalization and numerous tests, doctors still could not determine the cause, and An-Chih was advised to seek further evaluation at a larger hospital.

On January 30, 2017—the third day of the Lunar New Year—An-Chih was rushed to the emergency room at CMUH, accompanied by her son. After an examination, Dr. Ye diagnosed her with acute myeloid leukemia, warning, “Your hemoglobin level is dangerously low. You must stay for observation; this is life-threatening.” While others celebrated the holiday, An-Chih’s family was consumed by despair.

Overwhelmed by her diagnosis, An-Chih found herself questioning her future: “Lord, what should I do?” Lying in her hospital bed, she feared the worst, worrying about her sick daughter, elderly father-in-law, her brother-in-law’s young child, and the family business. “What if something happens to me?”

Despondent, An-Chih told her family, “If it gets too bad, let me go. Don’t resuscitate me.” She even asked her husband if he would remarry. In an attempt to provoke her, he replied, “Yes.” Hurt by his response, An-Chih became even more withdrawn but eventually decided to fight for her life, inspired by her son’s unwavering care.



Chang Hui-Ching (second from the right) was not feeling well during the process of donating hematopoietic stem cells. Fortunately, her colleague, Dr. Mingsui Liu (first from the right), was there to give her full support.



Chang Hui-Ching (front), a nurse at Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, knows that donating hematopoietic stem cells can save lives without compromising her own health.

New Life Post-Transplant

Although An-Chih promised her family to be brave, her anxious heart remained in suspense. “Can I really be cured? Will I get better? Where will we get the money to pay for the huge medical expenses?” Her husband comforted her, asking her to focus on treatment and assuring her that they would earn the money they needed.

“Is chemotherapy effective for this kind of disease?” the family asked worriedly. Dr. Yeh suggested that she try chemotherapy first, and if that didn’t work, then consider a stem cell transplant. On February 10, 2017, she started her first round of chemotherapy. After three consecutive treatments, she experienced severe side effects: vomiting, mouth sores, sore throat, loss of appetite, loss of taste, weakness, and a weakened immune system. These painful symptoms came one after the other, making her even more emaciated and weak. “You can’t just lie down all the time; if you can get up, try to move around more. You still need to eat something, even just a little; relying on nutritional injections alone isn’t enough,” Dr. Yeh said sympathetically, offering timely encouragement.

After enduring three rounds of chemotherapy, Dr. Yeh finally declared, “Chemotherapy is ineffective!” An-Chih felt like she had hit rock bottom. Should she just give up? On June 1, with Dr. Yeh’s



Recipient Huang An-Chih (left) is grateful for the kindness of donor Chang Hui-Ching (right), who has given her a new life and allowed her to be healthy and optimistic again.

assistance, she applied for stem cells match at the Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center. An-Chih also wished for a miracle to happen.

As expected, on July 10th, An-Chih received a message from the hospital that the match was successful. Immediately, a ray of light shone into her gloomy heart, as if it lit up the hope of the whole family. She was happy but worried, wondering, “Will the other party be willing to cooperate? Will there be any reaction or rejection after the transplant? Is there really a chance for a new life?” She could not imagine what the consequences might be.

Until the official transplant in August 2017, all of An-Chih’s physical discomfort gradually subsided, and the signs of rejection also gradually disappeared. “I am

a very lucky person because the situation was very urgent at that time. If a match had not been found, I might not be alive today,” An-Chih said in a choked voice. She is extremely grateful to the donor who was willing to give at her most helpless time, and to the Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center, all the Tzu Chi volunteers, and her family’s companionship and care for giving her the opportunity to meet her savior.

“My mindset has become younger and more vibrant. Even my food preferences have changed. I used to enjoy heavy flavors but now prefer lighter ones. Fortunately, I adjusted my attitude and stayed optimistic, which helped me get through it,” said An-Chih. It turns out that the donor’s blood changed her personality and appetite. After returning to a normal routine, she visits the hospital every three months for regular check-ups, and has started to accompany her husband to the market occasionally to do business.

Choosing to Do the Right Thing - Saving Life and Returning to Being a Mother

Chang Hui-Ching is the donor from Changhua. After graduating from university in 1996, she started working at Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital. “On August 4 that year, there was a hematopoietic stem cells registration campaign in the lobby of Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, so I had the opportunity to register.” Twenty-

one years later (in 2017), Hui-Ching received an email informing her, “You have been successfully matched...” At first, she thought the email was sent in error. After further confirmation, she realized that she was very lucky. “I was a match!” Her colleagues were also happy and congratulated her.

Hui-Ching has one older sister, one younger sister, and two younger brothers. “Not only was I a match, but my biological younger sister was also a match.” Of the two sisters, Hui-Ching’s hematopoietic stem cells were more suitable for the patient.

Hui-Ching shared the good news of the match with her family. Her mother who did not understand the process, was worried about the possible side effects on her daughter’s health and strongly opposed the donation. But as a nurse, she understood that life could not wait. “I will donate. I take care of patients in the hospital, including stem cells patients; I know they have endured a lot and are eagerly hoping for a second chance to live, so I am willing!”

Hui-Ching returned to Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital from Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital for a blood test and physical examination. It was discovered that she has a physiological problem with her heart, but it does not affect her ability to donate. She is lactose intolerant and cannot eat foods containing dairy products. She is concerned about calcium deficiency,

which could lead to upper respiratory or other infections. The volunteer caregivers provided her with nutritional supplements to replenish her calcium and help her maintain the best possible health condition.

When Hui-Ching began receiving injections of granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF), she experienced bone pain that was severe enough to interfere with her daily life and required her to take daily painkillers. Her slender frame, weighing less than 45 kilograms, and her thin blood vessels made it difficult to administer arterial injections. She even considered screaming to relieve the stress, exclaiming, “So this is what pain feels like!” This experience made her more empathetic to the suffering of the recipients. When the needle was removed, even though the pressure was applied for a sufficient time, her left hand developed bruising and swelling that lasted for almost a month. She watched the bruises change in size and color on a weekly basis, almost like an experiment, until they returned to normal.

Until the successful donation in August 2017, Hui-Ching was worried about whether the recipient was doing well and whether there were any risks involved. She also hoped that she wouldn’t be called back to donate lymphocytes again.

On the stage of the Dharma Lecture Hall, she saw An-Chih accompanied by

husband, children, good friends, and the attending doctor. “I finally felt relieved. Her family can continue to live a happy life.” Hui-Ching sent a photo of herself with An-Chih’s family to her younger brother, asking him to help reassure their mother that she chose to do the right thing.

Destiny Is Predetermined: Geographical Affinity Is Even Stronger

“I never imagined that I would have the chance to meet you, but I really wanted to take this opportunity to see if my personal traits have passed to you.” Humorous Hui-Ching likes spicy food, ice cream, and enjoys a lively atmosphere, would such qualities have influenced the recipient? Huang An-Chih smiled and replied, “I feel younger, and my taste has become milder.” From the moment they met, they felt a strong bond with each other.

47-year-old Hui-Ching is a straightforward, lively, energetic, and compassionate nurse. She loves learning new things and trying new experiences. At work, she changes units every three years with the goal of always being ready to step in and help save lives.

Hui-Ching is dedicated and responsible in her nursing work; she has never taken a vacation for herself. She is well aware of the shortage of nursing staff

and the constant need for emergency assistance. The only two occasions on which she took leave were when her son was sick and when her father died.

Twelve years ago, when their father died, their mother raised her five children through hardship and toil. Now, each sibling has his or her own family. Living in Hualien, Hui-Ching finds it difficult to make the long journey home frequently to be with her mother. Her longing to be with her mother often brings tears to her eyes.

Huang An-Chih, who is of similar age to Chang Hui-Ching's mother and has the same surname as Huang, can empathize with a child's feeling of missing her mother.

So, she stepped forward to give Hui-Ching a big hug.

The connection is really incredible. An-Chih's husband is from Zhanghua, and they often do business in the Yuanlin, Xizhou, and Zhanghua areas. This geographical overlap allowed Hui-Ching, who was born in Yuanlin, to establish a blood connection because of the donation. Hui-Ching said, "Destiny is predetermined, and there is certainly a reason for it." She is grateful to have given the recipient a chance to enjoy a new life and wishes Huang An-Chih a return to normal life and the courage to pursue her dreams.



Recipient Huang An-Chih's family of four and her close friend came to see her lifesaver Chang Hui-Ching, accompanied by volunteer Hong Lishu (back row, third from the right) from the caring group.