



CEDARS-SINAI MEDICAL CENTER.

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – NOV. 13, 2003

HIGHLIGHTS:

Thanksgiving is a holiday that Tuan (Tony) Ngo didn't celebrate in his homeland of Vietnam. But this year, the 47-year-old former welder from Fountain Valley, CA, has special cause to be thankful. He has survived Hepatitis B and liver cancer, and is now well on the road to recovery, thanks to a liver transplant at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. His goal now is to help educate others in the Asian community about the importance of organ donation.

THANKSGIVING TAKES ON NEW MEANING FOR VIETNAMESE MAN WHO SURVIVED HEPATITIS B AND CANCER, AND IS NOW HEALTHY THANKS TO A LIVER TRANSPLANT

LOS ANGELES (Nov. 13, 2003) – Thanksgiving is a holiday that Tuan (Tony) Ngo didn't celebrate in his homeland of Vietnam. But this year, the 47-year-old former welder from Fountain Valley, CA, has special cause to be thankful. He has survived Hepatitis B and liver cancer, and is now well on the road to recovery, thanks to a liver transplant at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

Tony's Thanksgiving message to his countrymen and countrywomen living in the United States is straightforward and heartfelt. "Many Asian people suffer from hepatitis B," he says. "But many don't ever get transplants." For one thing, the need for donated livers in this country far outweighs the number of organs that are available each year. Some of the donor organ shortage has been met by living donor liver transplantation, in which a portion of liver from an otherwise healthy individual is used for the transplant. But many patients and families remain unaware of this option. Tony's goal now is to help educate others about the importance of organ donation.

Tony, along with his parents, immigrated to the United States from Vietnam in 1983 when he was 27 years old. His 10 brothers and sisters remained behind. Upon his arrival in the United States, he set out to learn the welding profession and went to work for a firm in Santa Ana. He married and the couple had two sons, now ages 14 and 15. Life looked good.

Then, in 1997, he began noticing mysterious symptoms. He seemed to be tired constantly, and wanted only to sleep. His face and body became bloated, and he felt irritable much of the time. He noticed a yellow cast to his skin and eyes, and most frightening of all, there began to be blood in his stools.

His HMO referred him to a Los Angeles area hospital, but when he arrived there, he learned that they did not participate in his plan, after all. Confused and frightened, he turned to the family's long-time physician, Dr. Bui

(more)

Chung. The doctor suggested that Tony go to Cedars-Sinai for an evaluation.

“Tony was suffering from Hepatitis B, a liver disease that affects people of all races, but is especially prevalent in the Asian population,” explains Tram Tran, M.D., Assistant Director of Hepatology and Assistant Director of the Liver Transplant Program at Cedars-Sinai. “In fact,” says Dr. Tran, “Hepatitis B is seen in up to 10 to 15 percent of Vietnamese people, making this one of the highest groups in terms of prevalence.”

Tony began regular monthly visits with Dr. Tran and the full team of hepatologists at Cedars-Sinai. Then, just a little more than a year later, came the most frightening news of all. His diseased liver had now developed cancer, and a transplant was the only thing that could save his life. In March 2003, Tony was placed on the national liver transplant waiting list.

“I felt really bad,” he remembers now. “So sad and discouraged. I really thought that I would die.” Still, he never gave up hope, and on May 3, at midnight, that hope was rewarded. The telephone rang, and on the other end was a Cedars-Sinai transplant coordinator calling with life-saving news. A matching donor liver had been found.

Tony arrived at the hospital about 1:30 a.m., where he underwent some additional blood tests, an MRI and other pre-transplant routines. By 7 a.m., he was in surgery. Now, nearly 6 months after his transplant, Tony is profoundly grateful for life. “I can’t believe I’m still alive,” he says. “I thought I was going to die. I’m very lucky. The doctors, nurses and everyone else at Cedars-Sinai are just wonderful. They took such good care of me. I just wish I could thank my donor.”

Although he initially had to return to the hospital for daily blood tests, Tony now comes back once every 4 months for a check-up, and to exchange jokes with his physicians. “Dr. (Nicholas) Nissen still calls me the Mercedes guy,” he says with a laugh, “because my scar looks like the Mercedes logo.” Dr. Nissen was Tony’s transplant surgeon.

More recently, Tony came back to Cedars-Sinai for a different reason. “The hospital called me,” he explains, “to tell me about another Asian patient – a gentleman who needs a liver transplant, but is scared to have the operation.” Tony readily agreed to talk to the other patient, sharing his own experience and helping to allay the man’s fears.

“It’s so important to get the word out to the Asian communities where Hepatitis B and liver disease are such major health problems” he says. People who are sick need to know that a transplant can save their lives, and their friends and family members need to know that they can donate a small portion of their own liver and still lead a normal life.”

Dr. Tran agrees, and also emphasizes the importance of early detection and treatment of Hepatitis B. “Because some areas of Orange County have a population that is 40 percent Asian, we are targeting those areas for education about Hepatitis B screening and treatment,” she said. “It’s vitally important that people understand the importance of early diagnosis and treatment in order to help prevent cirrhosis and even liver cancer.”