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Donating convalescent plasma lets recovered COVID patients “Turn Positive into a Positive”

“It’s time to fight back. There is hope, but we need your help. If you have recovered from COVID-19, or if you think you may have had it but were never tested, we encourage you to visit positive2positive.com to get more information on how and where to donate plasma. You have the power to save a life.”

— Delisa English

by Rebecca Howerton

As principal of J.L. Mann High School, Charlie Mayfield preaches to students all the time about the importance of making a difference in the world around them. Now, he’s putting principle into practice by donating convalescent plasma to help others recover from COVID-19.

Mayfield, 55, was diagnosed in late March, and although he was never hospitalized, he had a fever lasting 11 days, body aches and difficulty breathing.

He had read a lot about convalescent plasma—blood plasma donated by those who have recovered from the virus and have antibodies—which is collected, transfused and used as a treatment to help those suffering from COVID-19.

As a regular blood donor, he reached out to The Blood Connection to learn more. As soon as he was cleared to donate plasma, he did, and found the experience to be easy and comfortable. He has donated six times since, roughly every four weeks.

“You feel very appreciated,” he says. “The people at The Blood Connection treated me like a rock star. It definitely fills your bucket.”

A church friend and parents of some of his students have died from COVID, so he recognizes the urgent need and the powerful impact.

“Having COVID antibodies is my superpower. Now, thanks to having this illness, I have the ability to

literally save lives,” Mayfield says. “Donating convalescent plasma is a great way for me to model the very behaviors I am trying to encourage in my students.”

Critical need

Dr. Hal Crosswell, who has assisted in securing access to Coronavirus therapies for Bon Secours St. Francis Health System, says although there hasn’t been a randomized controlled study of the efficacy of convalescent plasma, a Mayo Clinic study of more than 35,000 COVID-19 patients suggests it can significantly improve the recovery rate and decrease deaths, especially among patients requiring hospitalization or breathing support.

Based on these studies, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) in August for convalescent plasma as a therapeutic treatment for severe cases of COVID-19. Since that time, most clinicians have felt very comfortable about ordering it for their patients, and requests for donated plasma have continued to rise, Crosswell says.

“A lot of other therapies that were adopted early on have fallen by the wayside, but convalescent plasma survived,” he says. “Anecdotally, doctors believe that it helps, and it seems to be well tolerated. It also gives medical professionals a degree of comfort to be able to treat the virus more effectively

in many cases.” Dan Matthews, MD, pulmonary and critical care medicine physician with Prisma Health, agrees.

“Several clinical studies were published this year suggesting clinical benefit from administration of convalescent plasma in individuals with moderate and severe COVID-19 associated pneumonia. Additional studies are ongoing to confirm the presence and magnitude of benefit for these patients,” he says. “Given the limited treatment options, convalescent plasma is an important component of therapy in hospitalized patients with COVID-19 infection. It is therefore critical that we maintain an adequate stock of convalescent serum to treat these patients early in the course of their illness.”

“In this time of division and isolation, donation of all types of blood products can give a huge sense of empowerment,” Crosswell says. “This is one of the most altruistic things we can do to help our fellow citizens who are ill with COVID.”

Find out more

Lisa Hardin, the first patient in South Carolina to receive convalescent plasma, was diagnosed with COVID-19 on Good Friday, April 10. Because she became ill before the EUA was issued, she had to become part of a clinical study to receive the treatment. Hardin, a nurse with Prisma Health, had lost her sense of smell and was struggling for every breath. Alone in isolation and almost worn out, she learned that a donor had been found.

“They started the transfusion at about 9 p.m. and I fell asleep, after not being able to sleep for a week,” she says. “That morning they brought me a tray, and I could smell and taste the coffee. I never had another temperature or another cough, and my oxygen needs greatly decreased. It was just miraculous.”

Hardin credits the treatment with saving her life and wants to be sure there is adequate supply for everyone who needs it.

The Blood Connection is the sole provider of blood products to all local hospitals. After recently receiving a CARES Act grant to equip their donor centers and blood mobiles, they are launching an aggressive marketing campaign to secure convalescent plasma donations from those who have recovered from COVID-19.

Even those who aren’t sure they’ve been exposed to the virus may be able to help. The Blood Connection can test the blood of donors for antibodies, and if COVID antibodies are present, they can collect a smaller dose of convalescent plasma for patient use and give the donor an opportunity to come back later to make a more substantial donation, says Delisa English, president and chief executive officer of The Blood Connection.

“It’s time to fight back. There is hope, but we need your help,” English says. “If you have recovered from COVID-19, or if you think you may have had it but were never tested, we encourage you to visit positive2positive.com to get more information on how and where to donate plasma. You have the power to save a life.”