

Stem cell transplant evolution

St Vincent's Private Hospital remains at the forefront of stem cell transplants

For centuries, blood has been associated with both mystical and healing properties. The advent of stem cell transplantation in the modern era of medicine takes this belief in the healing power of blood one step further – to the point where blood has now become *the treatment option*, the gold standard of practice for specific blood borne diseases.

Bone marrow transplantation commenced at St Vincent's Private Hospital Sydney (SVPHS) in 1987, offering an alternative destination and treatment centre for overseas clients. At the time, transplantation was considered “experimental” and was not funded by health funds as it is today.

Rather than being seen as a successful financial venture, SVPHS initially sought to meet the need for the provision of a viable, innovative and accessible treatment option for its patients. Early SVPHS patients came from an international market that were self-funded, followed later by local patients who chose to have their transplants in the private sector as a result of long waiting lists in public hospitals. Today, the demand for the provision of transplantation in the private sector still exists as a result of high transplantation costs, the limited availability of beds, and the expensive nature of the medications used.

When the service commenced in 1987 there were no specific educational programs available for staff to help them gain knowledge and experience in the field of bone marrow transplantation. The knowledge, experience and education that was gained was as a result of working closely with the haematologists who taught the nursing staff in the environment in which they were working. Today this unique and trusted relationship continues and is evident between newer members of the transplant team and the haematologists at SVPHS.

With the emergence of an increased need for transplantation came more formalised haematology and transplant courses, oncology certificates, and degrees that were available for nursing staff. With no haematology registrar at St Vincent's Private Hospital, the role of the haematology/stem cell transplant clinical nurse consultant role evolved to include coordination



of treatments, the education of staff and the transplant patients, and further development of the unit.

The stem cell transplant unit at SVPHS offers advanced trained and committed staff the opportunity to work in a facility that provides intensive care for severely immunosuppressed patients, and strong consistent communication with the Visiting Medical Officers (VMOs).

To date, St Vincent's has performed 204 transplants that have been a mixture of autologous, allogenic and matched unrelated transplants that often carry a high mortality rate. This transplant service has now evolved into a larger cancer service that incorporates an oncology service.

In relation to the hospital's magnet journey, this speciality has emerged and thrived based on exemplary professional practice using solid structures and processes, and one that engages internal and external experts to drive high quality care.

When the service commenced there needed to be a designated transplant space, and the development of protocols and policies for drug administration and the transplant process. Staffing issues also needed to be addressed, as well as the establishment of infection control protocols, an awareness of best international practice, the evolution of newer anti-rejection drugs, and the provision of staff education of bone marrow transplantation.

The innovative aspects and ever-changing technology of stem cell transplant continues to attract interested and committed staff to this practice area. 



Gail Manning, haematology and stem cell transplant clinical nurse consultant

By Gail Manning & Xanthe Jones