

SUN COMMENT

Miraculous Recovery Sweet Tale

By MINDELLE JACOBS

It was an emotional New Year's Eve celebration for Dr. Heime Geffen and his family last night -- a toast not only to 2008 but to Geffen's mysterious survival.

They also raised their glasses to a special honey from the Holy Land that Geffen believes helped bring him back from the brink of death.

He should have been dead months ago from acute myelocytic leukemia -- a usually fatal condition caused by malignant stem cells in bone marrow.

In October 2006, Geffen, who had been treated over the years for a low-grade cancer of the lymph glands, went for a routine blood test and discovered that his white blood cell counts had dropped to perilously low levels.

A bone marrow test confirmed that his stem cells were no longer producing and replacing cells normally.

"The prognosis was grim. There was no recognized treatment for this other than, in young people, bone marrow replacement," says Geffen, a retired doctor from St. Catharines, Ont.

But for a man in his late 70s, a bone marrow transplant is extremely hazardous.

The diagnosis was essentially a death sentence. Geffen's oncologist sent him home to put his affairs in order.

Meanwhile, however, he was referred to a doctor who was doing a research study on patients with acute myelocytic leukemia using a trial drug.

Geffen took the new drug for three months and his white blood cell counts dropped even further. Before they had a chance to climb again, he ended up in hospital twice with a high fever.



ANTIBIOTICS FAIL

Antibiotics didn't help and last February Geffen was again sent home to die. He was so sick he spent most of his time in bed.

"I looked dreadful," recalls Geffen. "It was the inexorable downward path that I was following. We were all resigned to that."

Then fate took a strange turn. His daughter, who was vacationing in Israel, heard about specially cultivated Israeli honey that boosts the white blood cell counts of chemo patients.

One small study on Life Mel Honey, published in the journal Medical Oncology in 2006 found that 40% of the chemo patients given the honey didn't suffer the typical drop in white blood cell counts.

Geffen's daughter sent him six bottles of Life Mel and Geffen began taking a teaspoon of the honey twice a day.

"I was skeptical," says Geffen who used to get requests from his palliative care patients for sharks' teeth and other purported cures. "I've seen these fads come and go."

Within 10 days after he began taking Life Mel, his white blood cell count began climbing. By June, his counts were normal. He was playing golf.

"You don't get spontaneous remissions in leukemia," says Geffen. His oncologist was stunned by Geffen's recovery, but shrugged off the suggestion that the Israeli honey played a part.

University of Toronto leukemia expert Dr. Jeffrey Lipton is also skeptical. "Did (the blood counts) fortuitously recover about the time he started the honey and can you attribute what happened to the honey or not? That's the issue," he says.

DUBIOUS CLAIM

"To suggest that the honey may be involved here is very, very dubious."

Geffen's white blood cell counts dropped slightly in October and he went back on the trial drug for three months. He is, after all, a doctor. But he's still taking the honey, produced by bees fed a specific formula of plants (www.lifemel.ca).

"I was dying at the end of March," points out Geffen.

"Whether it was luck, whether it was one those unheard-of spontaneous remissions, whether it was a delayed response to the (trial drug), or whether it was the honey," he says, "my story is a miracle."



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