



Esther and Joel together with Dr Anselm Lee

A MOTHER'S INSTINCT SAVES HER 4TH CHILD FROM ACUTE MYELOID LEUKAEMIA

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~Esther (Joel's mother)~

Joel was born healthy in Malaysia. In September 2008, his parents started noticing that he was not behaving normally. Esther, Joel's mother recalls, “He started to refuse food, had on and off fever, was grouchy, and sometimes even went all quiet suddenly.” Joel was only nine months old, and was not able to communicate his pain to his mother. Unexplained bruises all over his body started to appear.

Esther brought him to see a couple of physicians, took blood samples, but they all came back with inconclusive diagnosis. His condition was deteriorating and he was brought to a local hospital in Malaysia where he was hospitalised for a few days. The doctors examined, did blood tests and gave him blood transfusion. His illness remained unexplained even after a series of extensive tests. “Something was not right. There must be someone who could tell me what was wrong with Joel,” cried Esther. She went in desperate search for doctors. Through friends and family members' recommendation, Esther eventually contacted Dr Anselm Lee, Medical Director and Consultant from the Children's Haematology and Cancer Centre at ParkwayHealth in Singapore.

They met on a Saturday afternoon on 27 September 2008. Dr Lee took a drop of blood from Joel's fingertip and made a diagnosis of acute leukaemia. On bone marrow examination, a diagnosis of Acute Myeloid Leukaemia (AML) was also confirmed. Mixed emotions of relief and fear arose immediately for Esther - a feeling of relief to finally know what was wrong with her baby, but a sense of fear at how the illness would affect his future. The family was informed about the complexity of the illness and the cost implications. It was a painful and hard decision for them but after a lengthy discussion of treatment plan with Dr Lee, Joel commenced his treatment on 1 October 2008.

"AML generally does not work well with chemotherapy alone, and bone marrow transplantation is often the treatment of choice after the disease is under control with chemotherapy. This treatment plan is the best but an expensive option," explains Dr Lee.

"One in every 500 children will develop cancer before his 18th birthday," shares Dr Lee. However, with effective treatment, most of the children diagnosed with cancer can be cured.

Joel received three cycles of chemotherapy from October to December 2008. In most hospitals providing AML treatment, children receiving chemotherapy have to be hospitalised and remain in the hospital until all complications are resolved. This means that for every cycle of treatment, Joel would have to stay in the hospital for 14 to 21 days. This did not only involve a financial burden, but it also posed as a stressful task for his mother who had to take care of her three other children at home in Malaysia. "I remember all the sleepless nights, watching over him after his chemotherapy sessions, carrying him in my arms as he dozed off."

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"Such trust and cautionary arrangement is critical because some 10 percent of children can die from the treatment complications if they do not receive effective and supportive care," Dr Lee stresses.

"The defining moment came when my husband and I were extremely anxious to know the results after Joel's first chemotherapy session. It was a great relief when we were told that he attained leukaemia remission after the first cycle of treatment. After which, we were informed we had to prepare him for a stem cell transplantation in January 2009. That was indeed a roller coaster ride for my family but we were very lucky to have my eldest son as a perfect match donor for Joel," recalls Esther.

The transplantation went very well under the meticulous care of ParkwayHealth's team of doctors. The average patient stays six to eight weeks in the hospital, but Joel went home at the end of the fourth week. Follow-up tests confirmed he has taken up his brother's bone marrow very well. The transplant treatment has also been accomplished in the shortest time. The latest bone marrow tests have shown that there is no sign of leukaemia using the most sophisticated methods of testing.

Joel will be turning two soon. Esther cried with tears of relief and joy when he was discharged last year as he was able to celebrate his one year old birthday just like any other kid. "I am so glad that I didn't give up in finding a doctor – the right one to treat him. I am very grateful to Dr Lee for giving hope to Joel and my family. Despite having to shuttle back and forth between Singapore and Malaysia for treatment, Joel is laughing and playing again!" Esther smiles.



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