

News

THEY BEAT THE ODDS:

Yong Zhuo with his parents, Madam Gan Ee Lian and Mr Tan Kok Chuang.

TNP PICTURE: BENJAMIN SEETOR



'We cried seeing our son suffering'

Parents' faith and financial aid from foundation help boy overcome rare blood disorder

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TWELVE years ago, a thrilled Madam Gan Ee Lian cradled her newborn boy in her arms.

She and her husband, Mr Tan Kok Chuang, had been praying for the arrival of their bundle of joy.

But when Tan Yong Zhuo was about five months old, their lives went into a tailspin.

Their child was continually nursing a cough, had severe bouts of diarrhoea and was often feverish.

When he was seven months old, doctors at KK Women's and Children's Hospital told the couple that he had a rare blood disorder called Hyper IgM Syndrome.

It meant that he had defective antibody-producing cells and needed a cord blood transplant to recover fully.

"Each time Yong Zhuo was hospitalised, he was connected to so many tubes. It was so painful to see him suffering. My wife and I would stand there and cry."

— Mr Tan Kok Chuang on how much their son suffered during his illness

Madam Gan, 46, who now works as a caregiver at an old folks' home, recalled grimly: "I felt terrified as my three sisters' children had Hyper IgM as well. Three of my nephews died before they turned 10."

Over the next few years, Yong Zhuo's medical bills caused a severe financial strain on the family.

Mr Tan, 43, a condominium manager and the sole breadwinner at that time, said: "My salary was about \$1,500 then. Each time Yong Zhuo stayed in hospital, we needed a few thousand dollars."

"He was in the hospital eight to 10 times a year. It was terrible."

Thankfully, the family received help from the Leukaemia and Lymphoma Foundation (LLF) when they were at their wits' end in 2006.

LLF gave the family \$49,000 – the full sum for a cord blood transplant – after a suitable donor was found for Yong Zhuo that year.

Mr Tan said: "The LLF provided funds for the procurement and shipping of the cord blood unit from overseas in 2006."

"Yong Zhuo was able to receive the transplant as LLF helped us financially."

The LLF, founded in 2003, helps those in the low-income group get treatment for leukaemia and other potentially fatal blood disorders.

Financial help

Last year, the foundation helped 81 patients financially with a total of \$1.5 million.

Madam Gan said: "To save money for Yong Zhuo's transplant, we downgraded from a four-room flat to a two-room flat in 2001."

"Even then, we could not cough up enough money for the transplant. We really must thank LLF for helping us."

Today, Yong Zhuo is a healthy and playful 12-year-old who attends Qiao Nan Primary School.

Touched by the work of LLF, members of the Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) Chinese Orchestra held a concert on Friday to help the foundation raise funds for individuals like Yong Zhuo.

Through ticket sales and donations, the students raised \$50,000.

This is NYP Chinese Orchestra's second fund-raising concert.

The first was in 2008 to raise funds for LLF.

LLF's chief operating officer, Mr Nik Gupta, said: "We are extremely touched by the compassion and generosity of the staff and students at NYP. This concert is meaningful, and some of our patients went to watch it."

Recalling the difficult period when Yong Zhuo was little, Mr Tan said: "Each time Yong Zhuo was hospitalised, he would be connected to so many tubes. It was so painful to see him suffering. My wife and I would stand there and cry."

When asked what advice they would give to parents whose children have Hyper IgM, Mr Tan said: "Never give up on your child. Always have faith. Fight on with him or her till the very end."



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 - BMI* of 18.5-35.0 kg/m² and body weight less than 150 kg
- *Body Mass Index (BMI= Weight (kg) / { Height (m) x Height (m) }

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