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Southeast Texas BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Hope and Chad Anderson at LifeShare Blood Center.

Help wanted Convalescent plasma donors needed to jump-start COVID-19 recovery

As COVID-19 infections soar to over 4.5 million confirmed cases across the United States and cases in Texas continue to climb, hospital beds are filling up fast. With no vaccine yet available and, therefore, no end to the pandemic in sight, providing the best treatment for patients suffering from the virus is vital.

Multiple medical doctors, including anesthesiologist and Texas Medical Association Board Member Dr. Ray Callas, MD, FASA, and Baptist Beaumont Hospital COVID Unit Lead Intensivist Dr. Qamar Arfeen, MD, FCCP Pulmonary & Critical Care, agree that convalescent plasma is key to jumpstarting the healing process. That is why they say it's so important to donate plasma if you have recovered from COVID-19.

"We do know that convalescent plasma has been shown to turn people's sickness around," described Calles, who was recently diagnosed with the virus himself. "Once you have been exposed to coronavirus and you have the antigen, your body makes antibodies. Once your body makes antibodies, you're now immune. We take some of



your plasma with your antibodies and give it to people who have the virus so that your antibodies then attack that virus for an immune response.

"It could stop the spread of disease. It could lead to a complete turnaround where otherwise, for many of these people, death is imminent."

"As an intensivist treating COVID-19 patients in our local hospitals, convalescent plasma thus far, has had a considerable impact on improving the outcomes of critical patients suffering from this virus," said Dr. Arfeen. "The key to success is for patients receive plasma early on in the course of severe illness. Currently, half of the patients

admitted to the hospital are unable to receive this life-saving treatment on time due to the shortage of donations in our community. Please help educate and inform our community of the critical need of convalescent plasma donations from those who have recovered from this virus.

"Our community should not have to lose lives because we have failed to build our surplus of plasma from recovered patients. Anyone who has recovered from COVID-19 or tested positive for the antibodies can email our team at CP@HARBORhcs.com. The team will contact you and guide you in the process. Your plasma could be the key to saving lives."

The FDA, too, is urging people who have overcome the virus to donate plasma.

"If you have fully recovered from COVID-19, you may be able to help patients currently fighting the infection by donating your plasma," the FDA website reads. "People who have fully recovered from COVID-19 for at least two weeks are encouraged

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'You're a hero,' Pamela Delaet of Harbor Healthcare tells Rachel Belcher, who is donating plasma.



PLASMA

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to consider donating plasma, which may help save the lives of other patients.”

Saving lives – that’s exactly what donating convalescent plasma amounts to, says Indorama Ventures Vice President of Manufacturing Chad Anderson. Anderson has been actively reaching out to the community to tell people about the merits of convalescent plasma for COVID-19 treatment and asking them to donate to maintain the supplies at local hospitals. After contracting and recovering from

COVID-19 himself, he is doing more than talking about it. Anderson and his wife, Hope, who has also recovered from COVID-19, were at LifeShare Blood Center on Laurel Avenue in Beaumont on July 16 ready to put those words into action.

“I started out about four weeks ago being one of the spokespersons for convalescent plasma. About a week after we did our first interview on the treatment, I actually tested positive, along with my wife and daughter,” said Anderson. “For me, it was kind of an opportunity because now, not only can I talk about the treatment, but I can also give my plasma to the hospital as part of the effort to help save someone’s life. Just being a part of it as a spokesperson and then actually getting to donate plasma is really kind of neat. It’s great to be able to see it from both sides – not just talking about donating but actually getting to do it.

“If you look out into the community, there are things we can do to help our fellow citizens, and this is one. With the pandemic going on, there’s so much fear, there’s so much unknown out there in the community. This is something that’s actually working, so let’s get out there, and let’s do this. This is helping our neighbors. It’s saving lives.”

Indorama Ventures strives to be a conscientious corporate citizen and is committed to the community surrounding its Port Neches plant, as well as reaching out to touch the lives of Southeast Texans across the area, said Anderson. As a company, Indorama Ventures has already donated about \$3 million to COVID-19 relief efforts around the globe, he estimated, and Anderson and his team in Port Neches are doing their part to help stem the spread of the virus.

“The division that I’m over, we actually made about 60,000 gallons of hand sanitizer, and we’ve donated that out to communities all across Texas,

Louisiana, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama... In trying to figure out what we could do – as a company – to help the community, we thought, we can take our own plant and our own processes and turn around and give that product out to the community. We still have more to give out, as well. We’re not done donating yet.”

The company is still finding ways to help mitigate the impacts of the virus, he described, and Anderson himself is ready to do what he can to help, such as donating plasma.

While he was able to donate July 16, Hope was asked to come back later due to low iron levels. According to LifeShare rules and FDA and CDC recommendations, people donating convalescent plasma after recovering from COVID-19 must be symptom-free for 14 days and meet all the criteria required for a regular blood donation, including a high enough percentage of iron in the blood. She said she would be eating iron-rich foods to raise her level and come back to donate at a later date.

Rachel Belcher, 19, was also at LifeShare on July 16 to donate convalescent plasma after her bout with COVID-19. She goes to church at St. Francis in Orange, she shared, and a fellow parishioner became ill and needed convalescent plasma to assist in recovery. At the time, hospital supplies were running low, so she answered the medical facility’s call for plasma donations.

“I am donating convalescent plasma for COVID-19 patients,” said Belcher. “I had a deacon at my church that was in the hospital. He was in desperate need of plasma, and they had a shortage. I didn’t even realize you could do this until then, so I was like, ‘Let me hurry up and do that!’ Then I realized how short they were at the hospitals everywhere, basically. I realized there was such a big need for it, and I wanted to help.


“He’s the reason I came here in the first place, but I think he already got what he needed. This is going to the hospital.”

“You’re a hero,” Harbor Healthcare System Community Education Coordinator Pamela Delaet told Belcher at the donation center. According to Delaet, Harbor Healthcare System and Dr. Arfeen have been advocating for convalescent plasma donations throughout the Southeast Texas community. Arfeen has said convalescent plasma transfusions for COVID-19 patients is the critical first step in a three-prong approach to “curing” the virus, followed by an antiviral treatment (Remdesivir) and then steroids (Interleukin 6).

“Dr. Arfeen is very passionate about building our surplus of convalescent plasma,” said Delaet. “For patients who are suffering in the hospitals, the sooner and faster it is readily available to those patients, the more he is seeing significant improvements where those patients are not having to be put on a vent.


“When we first started... it would take 3-5 days for the plasma to come in and some patients were so critical that they ended up passing before they even had a chance to get the plasma. It all started there when Dr. Arfeen started rallying people in the community to get the word out that we need people who have recovered from COVID-19 to donate their plasma. It’s free of charge, and LifeShare has been a huge part of all of this.”

LifeShare Blood Center Account Manager Netty Giglio reiterated the importance of convalescent plasma in treating a novel virus with no vaccine yet available.



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COVID-19 CONVALESCENT PLASMA

“Since it’s a relatively new virus and there’s not a vaccine, (convalescent plasma) is one of the forerunners in battling the disease,” Giglio described. “Anyone who has had the disease has since created the antibodies, and right now that is one of the leading ways to fight the disease. So, they’re able to donate their plasma, and then it’s transfused to patients fighting the disease now. LifeShare was one of the first in the country to do this, and we’re really excited about that.”

Giglio said the response has been great, but more donations are needed to keep up with constant demand. The paperwork is minimal, and it generally takes less than an hour to donate.

“We’ve had a lot of calls about it, so a lot of people want to help,” Giglio said. “There are a couple of forms that need to be filled out, obviously, and then we’ll schedule people for the donations. We’re able to direct (those donations) to certain hospitals, not necessarily to certain patients.”

“The more people who come in to donate, the more the hospitals have it on-hand and ready. We have a whole team in hospital services and, as far as all of our blood products, they get them where they need to be. So, if everyone’s serviced in this area, they’ll send it to Houston or wherever it needs to go.”

Belcher said, for her, it was similar to giving blood, though it takes a little longer.

“I’ve given blood before, but not plasma. It’s about the same,” she compared. “I think it’s better because you get the blood back.”

Callas said Belcher is right: It’s easy to donate

and there is no cost; however, the cost of not giving could be very high indeed – the price of a human life.

“I’m a big believer that we’re not utilizing enough donors to get convalescent plasma to the patients that need it. We need to get the word out: If you’ve had COVID, please contact LifeShare or whoever to donate,” he encouraged. “I don’t think we’ve done a good job of letting people know, first of all that a donation of plasma isn’t going to kill you or hurt you, and number two that your plasma donation can go straight to someone who is dying in the hospital... We are doing a disservice to our community if we don’t donate.”

Callas said he hopes to soon be free of the virus, and he will be visiting the blood center himself.

“As soon as I’m symptom-free and I’m cleared via a test saying that I do not have the virus-load anymore, I’m going to go donate plasma,” he shared. “I donate blood all the time, and now that I’ve had COVID, I want to donate plasma so that it can be used to hopefully save someone’s life. It’s the right thing to do. The worst-case scenario is that the blood center tells you

that you’re not a candidate to donate, but at least then you know you’ve tried to help.

“It’s not that big of a deal to donate. It doesn’t hurt, and it’s worth every bit of your time spent doing it. It takes, literally, 30-45 minutes for you to

save someone’s life. I think it’s worth it. Don’t you?”

Dr. Callas, Harbor Healthcare, LifeShare and other local medical facilities request that community members who have recovered from COVID-19 and have been symptom-free for 14 days donate plasma now and every 28 days.

“Anyone that’s been infected and they’ve done well against the virus, I’m asking them to go and call LifeShare Blood Center and donate plasma because as we continue to have more and more people that are critically ill in all of our hospitals around here, those donations are critical,” Callas concluded.

Email Harbor Healthcare for more information at cp@harborhcs.com or call LifeShare Blood Center at 4305 Laurel Ave. in Beaumont at (409) 838-5289 to find out more and schedule a time to donate.

Anyone who thinks they may have the virus should call their primary care physician, or if they are experiencing shortness of breath, chest pain or other serious symptoms, call 911.

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