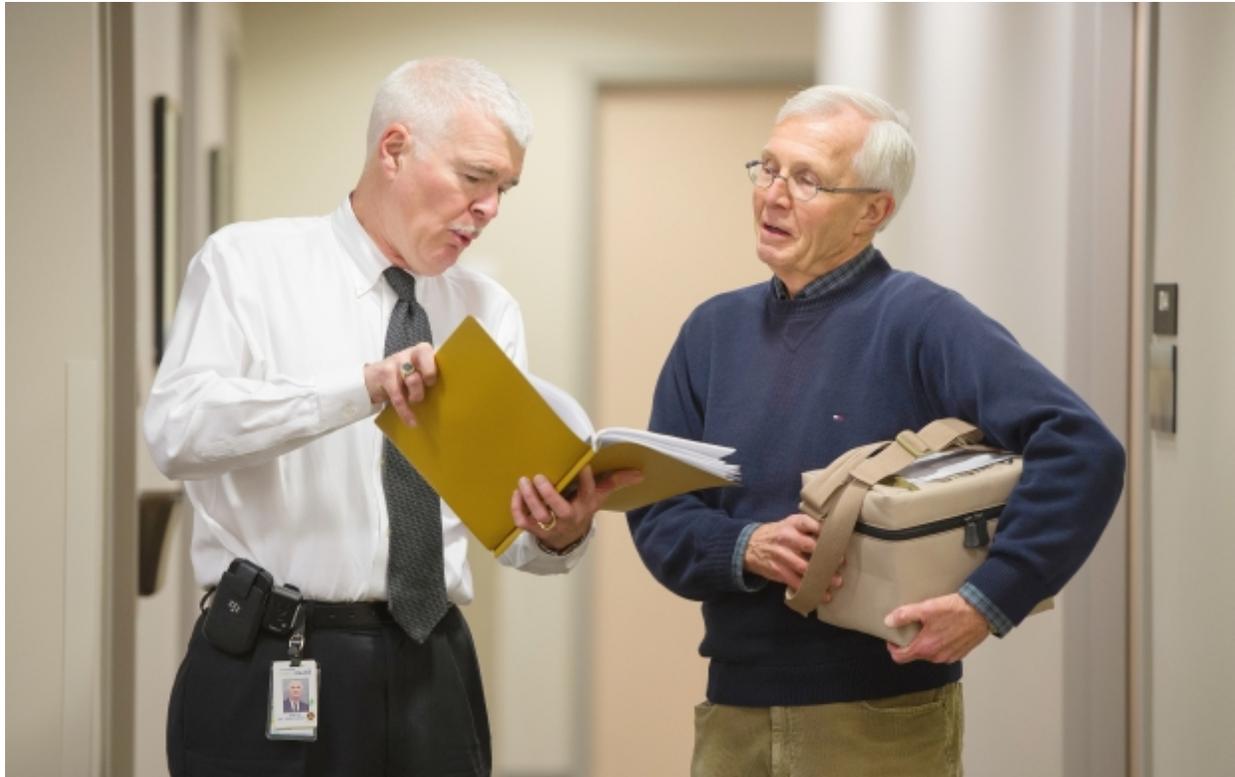


# Ex-Mounties serve as couriers for life-saving bone marrow stem cells

By Elaine O'Connor, The Province December 19, 2013 4:24 PM

<http://www.theprovince.com/health/Mounties+serve+couriers+life+saving+bone+marrow+stem+cells/9307773/story.html>



Dr. John Shepherd, left, talks with retired RCMP officer Keith Leishman, who holds a container used to transport bone marrow stem cells. Photograph by: Gerry Kahrman , The Province

Keith Leishman, a retired RCMP staff sergeant and former CSIS officer, was sent on a critical international mission this year — but not the kind you'd think.

It had nothing to do with detective work or espionage: Leishman completed a high-stakes medical mission as a volunteer bone marrow stem cell courier.

The 72-year-old South Surrey resident is one of a dozen retired Mounties recruited and trained by the Bruce Denniston Bone Marrow Society to make crucial deliveries of human tissue to B.C. patients awaiting life-saving treatments.

The Bone Marrow Courier Program was set up by the Society and Vancouver Coastal Health in 2012. Formerly, Vancouver General Hospital staff served as couriers, but as more treatments were performed, some staff were away 50 per cent of the year. And, it was costly.

Because of the delicate nature of human tissue transport, not just any volunteer would do. Yet retired Mounties have experience with stressful operations, understand the importance of

securing evidence and confidentiality, and are accustomed to dealing calmly and authoritatively with security.

“One of the advantages they see with RCMP officers is the experience they have with continuity of possession,” Leishman explained. “Just like you take a piece of evidence, once we take possession of those stem cells they can’t leave our sight until we turn them over at the lab at VGH. There is a very strict protocol in place.”

Deliveries must be made within 72 hours of removal from a donor, as the tissue starts to degrade. Samples must be kept at a precise temperature and in sight at all times — even while navigating customs and airport security.

Leishman went on his first mission in mid-September, flying to Berlin to collect a sample. He secured it as his carry-on luggage, got it safely through customs — but never through X-rays, which damage the material — and completed his mission without incident. Others have faced flight delays, airline strikes and bad weather.

Volunteers often spend just 24 hours on the ground.

“It’s not a holiday,” he said. “You are focused on getting that package back to someone who is very ill. It could be someone’s last chance.”

Nor is it glamorous. Volunteers fly economy, stay at hotels near donor centres, not tourist areas, and get by on a \$50 per diem. Then there is the jet lag — and anxiety.

Dr. John Shepherd, director of the VGH-based Leukemia/Bone Marrow Transplant Program of B.C., said ex-RCMP couriers have made more than 70 stem cell deliveries.

“These guys are doing it solely out of the goodness of their hearts,” said Shepherd. Patients, he added, feel more secure knowing “their cells are being hand-carried by a trained former police officer.”

The B.C. program has performed an estimated 3,900 stem cell transplants, to treat acute leukemia, blood cancers and other blood diseases, since it began in 1989. More than 45 per cent of recipients are still alive 25 years later.

To Leishman, that’s the real reward.

“In a lot of cases these patients are in life-and-death situations — so to be able to play a small part in that, even at my age, there’s a sense of satisfaction. It’s meaningful.”