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## Eleven-year-old Leukemia Patient Rings Bell Celebrating Cancer-Free Diagnosis Following Clinical Trial

*Broward Health staff celebrate with Avi*

May 25, 2023 -Following two and a half years of treatment for leukemia, the day Avinash “Avi” Ghirow, 11, had long been waiting for finally arrived in March, when he rang the bell to celebrate the end of his chemotherapy treatments. It is a

celebration that may not have been possible if Avi had not been enrolled in a clinical trial recommended by doctors at Broward Health.

“This was an incredibly happy day for Avi,” said Hector Rodriguez-Cortes, M.D., the pediatric hematologist-oncologist who treated Avi at Broward Health Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale. “He cried because he knew the magnitude of this outcome, and we were all so happy for him, we cried too.”

Avi’s symptoms could easily have been overlooked as the flu or a multitude of other minor ailments. His family first took him to a pediatrician because he was pale, lethargic, coughing and not drinking much. The pediatrician suggested taking Avi to a local emergency department for further evaluation. He was then transferred to Broward Health Medical Center where bloodwork revealed that his complete blood count was abnormal, eventually leading to a diagnosis of leukemia.

When Avi was diagnosed in December of 2020, his medical team, led by Dr. Rodriguez-Cortes, presented all treatment options to his parents, including a clinical trial, Protocol AALL1731.

“Clinical trials provide access to cutting-edge therapies and, new drugs,” Dr. Rodriguez-Cortes said. “Depending on the type of cancer, clinical trials can be very specific and tailored for the patient and have the potential to improve outcomes.”

Avi’s parents, who immigrated to the U.S. from Guyana, never hesitated to enroll their son in the trial, trusting the advice of his doctors. Given the positive outcome, Avi’s family is very happy with their decision.

“The treatment here is 110% better than Guyana,” Avi’s father, Nandkumar Ghirow, said.

When the Ghirow family elected to proceed with the clinical trial, Avi began the first phase of treatment, a 29-day

induction period. He received chemotherapy intravenously and through a spinal tap. At the halfway point, a minimal residual disease test was conducted to see if Avi's body was going into remission and if there was evidence of leukemia cells. The objective is for the patient to be in remission by the day after the induction period is complete. Avi was.

This experience inspired Avi to become an oncologist when he grows up so he can treat cancer patients with the same tender loving care he received. His dad shared that prior to his diagnosis, just like many children, he wanted to be a firefighter or police officer.

Although receiving chemotherapy was essential for Avi, laughter is also a great medicine. Dr. Rodriguez-Cortes' bedside manner harkens back to the "Patch Adams" movie starring the late Robin Williams and helps lighten the mood with his patients.

"I dance when I have to dance with them. I jump when I have to jump with them. I cry when I have to cry with them," Dr. Rodriguez-Cortes said. "To be a pediatrician, you have to develop relationships. You have to be at their level, and you have to be human."

As part of Broward Health's 360-degree comprehensive approach, psychologists help patients and their families cope with the range of emotions involved when battling cancer. Child life specialists can also help explain a diagnosis to a child through music or by dancing, drawing, playing games or exercising, depending on the child's level of cognitive development.

"Avi was also lucky to have his maternal grandmother, Gangadai, in his corner," Dr. Rodriguez-Cortes said. "She brought Avi in for all of his treatments and carried the banner for him."

Rajinder Persaud, D.O., a Broward Health pediatric resident,

met Avi the day he was diagnosed with leukemia, which happened to be the first day of his pediatric hematology-oncology rotation. “We are both from the country of Guyana, and Avi’s relationship with his devoted grandmother reminded me in many ways of my own relationship with my grandmother.,” Dr. Persaud said. “I feel like I was put in his life at a difficult time for a higher purpose, and it was a remarkable experience to watch such a sweet, humble child ring the bell and celebrate his victory over cancer.”

Now that Avi has entered the post-treatment phase, he sees Dr. Rodriguez-Cortes monthly for routine bloodwork and physical exams and will be monitored for a year to make sure that his cancer doesn’t return. As life returns to normal, Avi is busy enjoying childhood as a typical fifth grade student who enjoys reading books and learning how to play cricket from his dad.

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