

Handle with Care

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The scene opens at London's Heathrow Airport. Hundreds of busy travellers stand on toes and try to find a spot to see if their flight will be on time or if they'll have to make a call letting waiting family and friends know they'll be late.

A man wearing a black backpack is in the midst of the throng.

His destination: Berlin.

Mission: pick up the time-sensitive product, keep it safe and under optimum conditions and make it back to Vancouver within 72 hours.

Failure is not an option.

While it may sound like a spy movie, this life-saving mission involved no cameras, only 72-year-old retired RCMP veteran Keith Leishman, who helped to save the life of someone requiring a bone-marrow transplant.

The South Surrey man signed up as a bone-marrow courier over the summer [through a program](#) run by Vancouver Coastal Health and the Powell River-based Bruce Denniston Bone Marrow Society after hearing about it through a fellow retired officer.

Through the [Canadian Blood Services OneMatch Stem Cell and Marrow Network](#), international donors are matched with patients and then vetted couriers are sent to the 169 participating countries to retrieve the product.

In previous years, VCH staff would be sent to retrieve the stem cells, but the process was too costly to maintain and, in June 2012, the courier program was established.



South Surrey's Keith Leishman, 72, has signed up to be a donor courier for B.C. patients.—image credit: Sarah Massah photo

“The whole stem-cell program is such a crucial thing for very seriously ill people, and I thought well, if I can play a part in that and be of some use in my retirement years, then why not. So, I said I'd do it,” Leishman explained.

For his first trip, Leishman travelled to Germany's capital city on Sept. 17, with a layover in Heathrow Airport, armed with the case that would later contain the stem cells, a binder that contained all the details of the trip, two checklists and letters for airport officials listing the reason for his travel.

The itinerary and step-by-step checklists came in handy for Leishman, who was admittedly nervous about handling such an important product.

“You have to be thinking about what you’re doing the entire time. You can’t be distracted by anything else. You’re focused on the assignment and that’s it,” he said.

After arriving in Berlin, and following a small delay, Leishman was on his way to the medical centre to pick up the stem cells.

The process, he explained, needs to be followed to a T. There must be a test vial so doctors in B.C. can test the stem cells on the patient, the product must be in a clear, properly sealed bag, complete with detailed and accurate labels and finally, the product must be stored in the chilled box that is provided to the courier at the beginning of his assignment.

Once he had gone through his checklist, Leishman’s container was filled with the stem cells and he was sent on his way with a letter in German that detailed his reason for travel and a customs form for the package.

While going through two airports was never-wracking, as the stem cells can never leave his sight and can not be put in the X-ray machine, Leishman noted that staff at both locations were experienced with the courier program.

“They were all very helpful. They signed my form and I was on my way,” he said.

When he touched down at YVR, Leishman immediately made his way to the hospital and dropped off the stem cells.

Mission accomplished.

Now, three months later, Leishman said he looks forward to his next assignment some time in the new year, and he hopes that by sharing his story he can encourage others to get involved.

“I don’t think many people know about this program,” he said. “But you’re able to play a little part in the big process that often has some miraculous results.”