

Stem cell transplant cements Arizona men's father-son bond

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The Rev. John Sabbagh, left, and his son Ebby Sabbagh hugs nurse practitioner Kim O'Riley, Friday, Sept. 7, 2018 in Gilbert, Ariz. Thirty-five years after a Mesa man cared for his son when he was shot in their native Lebanon, the son is returning that devotion. Both the Rev. John Ibrahim Sabbagh and his 54-year-old son, Ebby Sabbagh, are celebrating one year of going strong since the elder Sabbagh received a crucial stem-cell transplant. (AP Photo/Terry Tang)

Thirty-five years after an Arizona man cared for his son when he was shot in their native Lebanon, the son is returning that devotion.

Both the Rev. John Ibrahim Sabbagh and his 54-year-old son, Ebby Sabbagh, are celebrating one year of going strong since the elder Sabbagh received a crucial stem cell transplant. After undergoing chemotherapy for [acute myeloid leukemia](#), the 88-year-old opted to undergo the transplant in September, 2017, at Banner MD Anderson Cancer Center in Gilbert, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) southeast of Phoenix.

It was Ebby, also the oldest son, who ended up being enough of a match and providing the [stem cells](#).

"We all have learned from this: Be a positive fighter," Ebby said Friday as he helped his father stand to look at the cake hospital staff provided for his transplant anniversary. "If he doesn't give up, we don't give up."

Dr. Rajneesh Nath has done [stem cell transplants](#) on several elderly patients. But never on one as old as John. Nath said he could tell after chemotherapy and other low-intensity therapies that the elder Sabbagh was strong for his age.

"He was walking the hallways and his ability to tolerate (treatment) was not any different than any of the younger patients we treated," Nath said.



Dr. Rajneesh Nath, left, watches the Rev. John Sabbagh blow out candles on his cake for his one-year transplant anniversary as Sabbagh's grandson John, right, looks on, Friday, Sept. 7, 2018 in Gilbert, Ariz. Thirty-five years after a Mesa man cared for his son when he was shot in their native Lebanon, the son is returning that devotion. Both the Rev. John Ibrahim Sabbagh and his 54-year-old son, Ebby Sabbagh, are celebrating one year of going strong since the elder Sabbagh received a crucial stem-cell transplant. (AP Photo/Terry Tang)

It was ultimately John's decision and he wanted to take the most aggressive approach. The elder Sabbagh, who was a chaplain for Arizona Department of Corrections for 13 years, said he thinks of himself as a fighter.

"A fighter, but not in negative way," he said in a soft-spoken voice.

Dr. Andrew Yeager, director of the Blood and Marrow Transplantation Program at the University of Arizona Cancer Center, said he would give the transplant team "a bottle of good booze to say 'Boy, you had the guts to transplant to someone in their late 80s.'"

"It's really up there and atypical," Yeager said.

An elderly transplant recipient may have a harder time in some areas such as recovery. Donor stem cells can go on the attack post-[transplant](#), a condition known as graft-versus-host disease. That can be debilitating even for a young patient. Also, Yeager said, patients ages 60 and older sometimes already have underlying issues with their major organs.

Ebby says their roles are now essentially reversed from when he was shot in Tripoli in 1983 during the Lebanese Civil War. Ebby had just turned 18. He was driving his dad's car to pick up ice cream after finishing exams. Several men sprayed his car with gunfire at a surprise checkpoint, Ebby said. Despite shrapnel wounds and part of his left leg getting torn off, he managed to drive away.



The Rev. John Sabbagh, left, and his son Ebby Sabbagh talk with nurse practitioner Kim O'Reilly, Friday, Sept. 7, 2018 in Gilbert, Ariz. Thirty-five years after John Sabbagh cared for his son when he was shot in their native Lebanon, Ebby is returning that devotion. Both the Rev. John Ibrahim Sabbagh and 54-year-old son, Ebby Sabbagh, are celebrating one year of going strong since the elder Sabbagh received a crucial stem-cell transplant. (AP Photo/Terry Tang)

Eventually friends helped get him to a hospital. He was later transferred to a hospital in Beirut and spent more than three months there in recovery. John made the two-hour commute from Tripoli to stay in the hospital or with friends.

"Through this whole thing, Dad was right by me," Ebby recalled. "He refused to go home until he takes me with him."

The experience of helping his father through cancer has in some ways brought them closer.

"What I'm getting back is tons. Every moment I cherish," Ebby said.
"We've really had some amazing moments together."

John will have to have another bone marrow biopsy this month to see if the cancer is still present or has grown. Even with that uncertainty hanging over the whole family, Ebby says they have no regrets.

"Having that opportunity to extend his life, to be able to counter this disease—was it worth it to do this? The answer is yes," he said.

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