



The Sunflower Fund  
Partnered by DKMS

## MEDIA RELEASE

### THE SUNFLOWER FUND JOINS FORCES WITH DKMS, THE LARGEST NETWORK OF STEM CELL DONOR CENTERS IN THE WORLD

**To provide as many patients with different forms of blood disorders with a second chance at life the non-profit organisations formed a partnership and will collaborate as “The Sunflower Fund partnered by DKMS.”**

[Cape Town, 28 May 2020] Cancer is the second leading cause of death globally, accounting for an estimated 9.6 million deaths according to the World Health Organisation. Their statistics further indicate that the cancer burden continues to grow globally, exerting tremendous physical, emotional and financial strain on individuals, families, communities and health systems. This burden means large numbers of cancer patients globally do not have access to timely quality diagnosis and treatment. This is also the case when it comes to blood cancer, which makes up approximately 7% of all cancers.

“Every five minutes someone in South Africa is diagnosed with blood cancer or other life-threatening blood disorders such as Thalassemia. For many of these patients their only hope of cure is a stem cell transplant from a matching donor,” says Dr. David Brittain, Clinical Haematologist, Albert Alberts Stem Cell Transplant Centre - Pretoria

Only one third of patients find a matching donor in their own family. The majority therefore depend on an unrelated donor, whose relevant tissue characteristics, so-called HLA-characteristics match those of the patient as closely as possible. Tissue characteristics are heavily influenced by the ethnic background and vary according to genetics and region. Accordingly, finding a match is far more complex compared to matching blood types.

“A successful blood stem cell transplant needs a HLA tissue match. Globally doctors activate searches on a daily basis for donors, in order to save their patients’ lives. A donor match could come from anywhere in the world.” says Dr. Brittain.

Thus, the Sunflower Fund and DKMS have joined forces to register as many potential blood stem cell donors as possible with the most diverse ethnic backgrounds. Growing the diversity of the donor pool by collaborating across borders is key when it comes to helping patients worldwide in need of a life-saving blood stem cell transplant with finding a match swiftly.

The Sunflower Fund NPC, Reg. No: 2000/008979/08, VAT Reg. No. 4350236958  
Non-Profit Organisation Reg. No.: 020-728-NPO  
Public Benefit Organisation (section 18A) Reg. No : 130000158  
In Terms of Section 18A(2) of the Income Tax, No. 58 of 1962

PO Box 31163 Tokai 7966 Cape Town, South Africa  
Office 106B Richmond Centre, 174-206 Main Road, Plumstead, 7800  
Telephone: 021 701 0661 • e-mail: [info@sunflowerfund.org](mailto:info@sunflowerfund.org)  
Regional offices: Johannesburg and Durban

Directors: Dr Elke Neujahr, Prof. Rajkumar Ramesar, Stephan Schumacher, James Sedgwick, Douglas Walker, CEO: Alana James

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Now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year, The Sunflower Fund brings a wealth of expertise in the recruitment of stem cell donors and building an ethnically diverse registry of committed donors from across South Africa, Namibia, Ghana and Nigeria. The organisation also maintains a patient support fund to assist patients who are unable to afford costs associated with getting to transplant.

“We are very excited about the partnership with DKMS. Growing the diversity of the donor pool is critically important and we see a fantastic opportunity to be able to do this together not only in South Africa but also in other African countries. We want to register as many potential donors to provide as many patients as possible with a second chance at life. This is our common mission,” says Alana James, CEO of the Sunflower Fund partnered by DKMS.

The Sunflower Fund and DKMS were both founded from a personal story – of families losing a loved one, who committed to using their experience to champion the cause of stem cell donation to help other families that would in the future find themselves in the same position.

The formation of The Sunflower Fund in 1999, was inspired by the heroic struggle against leukaemia of two brave young men, Darren Serebro and Chris Corlett. While he was in treatment for Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia (ALL), Chris Corlett painted a picture, which he titled ‘Sunflowers of Hope’. This was the main inspiration for the name of The Sunflower Fund, by his mom Tina Botha the founder of the organisation.

The DKMS story began when Mechtild Harf was told that the only treatment for her leukaemia was a bone marrow transplant and that she had no matching family members. At the time, there were only 3,000 potential stem cell donors on the German registry to provide a transplant. Her husband Peter Harf founded DKMS in 1991 and within one year, the registry counted 68,000 potential donors. Unfortunately, Mechtild did not survive, but before she passed away, she made Peter promise her that he would not stop fighting until every patient had a matching donor.

In different corners of the world, the fate of these people started a movement, a community of people committed to one cause: fighting blood cancer.

“Diseases do not respect borders, nor can our work be restricted by borders,” adds James.

“Every life saved is a success – all over the world. We are driven by a simple ethos: to best serve our patients, we cannot simply address the problem at hand, but must look to the future to anticipate the needs of the people whose lives rely on our work,” says Dr. Elke Neujahr, Global CEO DKMS.

“Facing the realities of genetic diversification and the subsequent role it will play in cancer treatments, global activities ensure the greatest chance of success for patients whose lives depend on finding a matching donor. Together we want to make a big impact in the lives of patients with blood disorders in South Africa and across the globe,” Neujahr continues.

With almost 10 million available donors and nearly 85,000 transplants facilitated, DKMS is the largest network of donor centers in the world. The impact of the organisation is remarkable, with 40% of all unrelated blood stem cell transplants worldwide made possible



by DKMS donors. This collaboration enables DKMS to contribute their experience in raising awareness of blood cancer and blood stem cell transplantation, of running an international registry and providing high quality blood stem cell products bringing hope to people all over the world.

### **About The Sunflower Fund**

The Sunflower Fund is a donor recruitment centre and stem cell registry for Africa and is part of a global network, dedicated to creating awareness about blood diseases and stem cell donation, recruiting blood stem cell donors and maintaining a registry of committed donors.

The Sunflower Fund pays for the cost of the tissue-type testing. This is fundamental to saving the lives of South Africans and patients globally who need a stem cell transplant. The chance of finding a matching donor is 1 in 100,000 – and as ethnic origin plays a significant role in the search for a donor, South Africa's rainbow nation is at a distinct disadvantage, requiring a large pool of prospective donors.

### **About DKMS**

DKMS is an international non-profit organisation dedicated to the fight against blood cancer. Founded in 1991 in Germany by Dr. Peter Harf, DKMS has expanded internationally in recent years by establishing entities in the US, Poland, the UK, Chile, together with BMST in India and in South Africa together with The Sunflower Fund partnered by DKMS. Together, they have registered more than 9.9 million potential blood stem cell donors and have given more than 84,000 patients across the globe a second chance at life by facilitating blood stem cell transplants.

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#### **Media Contact:**

Kim Webster

Head of Communication

[kim@sunflowerfund.org](mailto:kim@sunflowerfund.org)

Cell: 082 227 5209

For more information or for interviews contact: Kim Webster on 082 227 5209 or Traci Sassenberg 083 303 9200.