

LIKE BEING ON TOP OF THE WORLD



HOW ONE PSO STUDENT LEADER BECAME A STEM CELL DONOR — AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR ONCOLOGY CARE

NCODA Professional Student Organization leader Chukwubuiem “Chuck” Akanegbu stands at the peak of the Mount Storm King Trail at Olympic National Park in Washington in 2025.

When Chukwubuiem “Chuck” Akanegbu joined the the National Marrow Donor Program registry in October 2023, his signature took seconds.

It happened between classes on campus — an ordinary day, an ordinary hallway, students students moving like waves through lecture rooms. There was a table in the pharmacy building atrium with candy and stickers, volunteers talking to anyone who slowed down long enough to listen, and a simple ask: Take 20 seconds, swab your cheek and mail the kit.

Leading the drive was the University of Rhode Island’s NCODA Professional Student Organization (PSO) chapter — one of many student-led initiatives designed to bridge oncology education with real-world patient impact. For Akanegbu, swabbing wasn’t a dramatic gesture. It didn’t feel like some pivotal moment.

It felt easy.

But that’s the strange thing about marrow donor registries: most people never get called. And the ones who do often don’t realize their “yes” is waiting quietly in their history — years after the swab, long after graduation, long after the table in the atrium has been folded up and stored away.

For Akanegbu, the call came two summers later, after he’d moved across the country and started residency.

At first, he missed it.

Then he assumed it was spam.

PATH TO ONCOLOGY BEGAN IN A CLASSROOM

Akanegbu grew up in eastern Massachusetts in a family where healthcare was familiar terrain. His mother and both sisters were nurses, and even as a kid he found himself drawn toward medicine. But not nursing — pharmacy.

He remembers being fascinated by how medications worked, how something small could create profound change inside the body. When he enrolled at the University of Rhode Island, he committed to the

PharmD track, later joining an accelerated dual-degree pathway that included a Master of Science in Health Outcomes.

The turn toward oncology came through what seemed, at first, like a simple course decision.

During his program, he took a “Grand Challenge” class called Understanding Cancer, a course many students avoid because it isn’t the easy option. He went anyway, encouraged by a friend, and found a challenge both difficult and magnetic.

That class introduced him to Britny R. Brown, PharmD, BCOP, a clinical associate professor at URI and a board certified oncology pharmacist.

She didn’t just teach oncology. She opened the profession and NCODA PSO to Akanegbu, helping him to see oncology not as a speciality for “later,” but a calling worth building toward now.

PSO ISN’T A CLUB — IT’S A TRAINING GROUND

Akanegbu joined the URI PSO chapter

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in his early professional coursework. He quickly realized the value wasn't just exposure — it was participation.

The chapter brought in oncology physicians and clinical experts. Students worked through real topics and cases, talked through emerging cancer treatment modalities, and explored NCODA tools like PQI (Positive Quality Intervention) resources.

But for Akanegbu, the defining difference was leadership.

He served as vice president during his P3 year, helping expand programming and outreach. One of the most meaningful outreach efforts PSO chapters organize is their NMDP donor registration drives — events that put a life-saving registry within reach of young, generally healthy potential donors.

For URI PSO, it wasn't a new initiative. It was tradition.

THE DONOR DRIVE THAT BECAME A REAL MATCH

During his time with PSO, Akanegbu worked the booth and watched his peers sign up in waves. The setting was intentionally practical: the pharmacy atrium, where foot traffic stayed high and students had moments to pause between classes.

He signed up because he was already there — because he believed in the mission and because it cost him almost nothing. But he also signed up for the reason donor drives exist at all: You can't predict who will be needed.

THE DONATION PROCESS

By the time the NMDP caught up with Akanegbu — in the late spring of 2025 — he had graduated from pharmacy school in Rhode Island. He was a busy chief resident at a medical center in Oregon.

Yet he didn't hesitate.

The donation process moved quickly.

Akanegbu's coordinator worked around his strict residency schedule and time zone conflicts, staying late to



Akanegbu (right) stands with (from left) Jefferey Bratberg, PharmD, Brett Feret, PharmD, Erica Estus, PharmD, of the University of Rhode Island College of Pharmacy, State Rep. Julie Casimiro, and Chris Federico, President of the Rhode Island Pharmacists Association on Pharmacy Advocacy Day on May 14, 2014. The group met to honor honor a Senate resolution designating May as "Rhode Island Pharmacy Advocacy Month."

WHAT IS NCODA PSO?

NCODA created the Professional Student Organization (PSO) program to engage students in oncology-focused professional development, education, leadership, and community outreach.

PSO chapters operate on pharmacy and healthcare campuses, helping students:

- Connect with oncology professionals and mentors;
- Explore cancer care topics beyond standard coursework;
- Build leadership and patient advocacy skills; and
- Participate in service activities tied directly to oncology care.

There are now 65 established PSO chapters across 70+ campuses, spanning four continents.

Many PSO chapters also organize marrow donor registry sign-up events through the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP), helping expand the donor pool and increasing the likelihood that patients needing a match can find a match.

explain the process thoroughly and coordinate next steps.

Ultimately, the donation required travel. The young resident flew August 24 to Dallas, donating the next morning. The donation process took three hours.

During the collection, he listened to music. He talked with nurses. They offered him barbecue recommendations.

HOLDING THE BAG

It wasn't until near the end that the full emotional weight arrived.

Akanegbu expected to see blood. Instead, he saw a paler fluid: his collect-

ed stem cells.

The nurses showed him the bag. They let him hold it. And suddenly the meaning snapped into focus.

THE RECIPIENT HE MAY NEVER MEET

Akanegbu knows only minimal information about the recipient: the patient was around his age and had acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

As with most NMDP processes, donor-recipient communication is tightly limited. Donors may be able to exchange messages later, and only later still — if both parties agree — may contact information be shared.

For now, he doesn't know the outcome. What he does know is that the act matters even without closure.

A MESSAGE TO THE NEXT STUDENT LEADER

For Akanegbu, this experience didn't pull him away from oncology — it tightened his bond. The marrow registry embodied a truth that oncology professionals know: Commitment comes first, certainty comes later.

Donating stem cells didn't require prestige. It didn't require perfect timing. It didn't require expertise.

It required consent.

It required follow-through.

And it began with a 20-second cheek swab run by students standing behind a folding table.

That may be the most important lesson PSO provides: it trains future oncology professionals to understand that the work isn't someday.

The work is now.