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MoCo sickle cell patient makes MD history

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Jessica Ceja (left) poses with her husband. (Provided by UMMC)

A Silver Spring woman who has lived with sickle cell disease for most of her life has become the first adult patient with the condition in Maryland to receive U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved gene therapy, the University of Maryland Medical System announced Wednesday.

Jessica Ceja, a patient liaison at a Washington, D.C., hospital, received the cells by infusion Monday. Lyfgenia, the gene therapy administered to Ceja, was approved by the FDA in December 2023. A 12-year-old boy from Clinton, was the first in the nation to be treated following commercial approval, according to UMMC.

Ceja, 41, has experienced what UMMC characterized as “debilitating pain crises and frequent hospitalizations” for much of her life.

Aiming to prevent life-threatening complications and reach a long-term cure, the sickle cell anemia patient has been treated at UMMC, the University of Maryland Medical System's academic hospital, with her own genetically engineered stem cells.

"This treatment was something that excited us as a family, with the prospect of my being cured using my own stem cells and not having to look for a donor," Ceja said in a news release.

Jennie Law, a University of Maryland School of Medicine associate professor, said Ceja's disease has considerably impacted her quality of life with frequent hospital visits and reliance on regular blood transfusions for disease management.

"Given that she does not have an available donor for a stem cell transplant, she was an ideal candidate for gene therapy consideration," Law said.

Law, also a sickle cell disease expert at the University of Maryland Marlene and Stewart Greenebaum Comprehensive Cancer Center, is Ceja's hematologist.

Sickle cell disease is an inherited blood disorder that affects about 100,000 people in the U.S. and millions internationally, UMMC noted, adding that more than 5,000 Marylanders are living with the disease.

The medical center highlighted that Lyfgenia therapy is approved for patients aged 12 and older who experience severe, recurrent vaso-occlusive events not sufficiently controlled with standard treatments.

"The launch of the gene therapy program at UMGCCC represents the culmination of a multidisciplinary effort to build the infrastructure required to safely deliver complex cellular and gene therapies," a UMMC release says.

"This included developing clinical protocols, coordinating care across transplant, classical hematology, apheresis and inpatient teams, and establishing long-term follow-up pathways."

This story has been updated.