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Greenwich businessman works to find cure for Cooley's Anemia

By Ken Borsuk

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Photo: Bob Luckey Jr. / Hearst Connecticut Media
Executive Director and Financial Advisor for Morgan Stanley, Peter Chieco, at his Greenwich office, Conn., Wednesday, April 5, 2017.

GREENWICH — Peter Chieco’s daughter is about to get married, a milestone that seemed nearly impossible when she was diagnosed with Cooley’s Anemia as a toddler.

Chieco, of Bedford Corners, N.Y., is an executive director of Morgan Stanley in Greenwich who is the Westchester, Rockland and Fairfield County Chapter president for the Cooley’s Anemia Foundation.

Since 1988, when his daughter Michelle was diagnosed with the genetic blood disorder, he has focused on raising awareness and funds wherever he finds himself — at home and at work.

“Patients with Cooley’s Anemia or thalassemia cannot make a normal red blood cell,” Chieco said. “They need someone else’s. So every two weeks they get someone else’s red blood cells and it fills their tank back up. ...You can keep someone alive perhaps until the age of 10 or 12 just from blood transfusions, but then they’re going to die of iron overload.”

For Michelle and other people diagnosed with Cooley's Anemia, the transfusions and medication to reduce the built-up iron are the price they pay for survival.

Chieco said that research will provide the answers for a cure, but it's a slow process. A past-president of the Cooley's Anemia Foundation, he remains active on the board of directors and has been pushing the foundation's mission of making sure people know who is at risk for the genetic disease.

Cooley's Anemia was once found nearly exclusively in the Italian-Greek communities, but it has been found in recent years throughout the "malaria belt" of upper Africa, the lower Mediterranean and across to Asia.

"It's not something that's often tested for," Chieco said. "If the doctor knows your ethnic background they might push for it, but if people know to ask to be tested, it at least gives them the information to know. And with the more information we have, the more chance there is for a breakthrough."

Chieco is among about two million Americans who carry the gene that causes Cooley's Anemia. It was his daughter's diagnosis that inspired him to work to eradicate the condition.

"It's the same thing that every parent who has a child who is sick feels," Chieco said. "You would switch places in a heartbeat and one of the cruelties of life is you cannot switch places. It's hard, but you try to create a positive atmosphere that we can work through this. That's what keeps me involved and going. You can easily get depressed about things because there are patients that haven't done well but you have to keep going."

Now 28 years old, Chieco's daughter is a pediatric nurse.

"She has all the typical challenges that patients do," Chieco said. "Every two weeks she has to get her blood transfusion and ...every night she has to do her chelation medicine

to get rid of the iron that comes from the transfusion. But overall she's doing well...This is part of her life. ...There have been a ton of challenges along the way but she's always had a positive attitude."

In the United States, Chieco said, good medical care and financial supporters like the Foundation have helped with therapies and finding a cure.

"We're lucky in this country because we have good health care and we at least have options," Chieco said. "In many countries they don't have options...We're focused on curing Cooley's Anemia throughout the world. We're focused on creating a better quality of life for all patients. ...Funding research here in the United States is a really good way of fighting a disease but we also keep a global perspective. For us, a cure is a cure for everyone."

More information is online at <http://www.thalassemia.org>.

The foundation is always looking for volunteers and financial support, he said. Clinical trials are under way for gene therapy treatment for both Cooley's Anemia and Sickle Cell Anemia.

Funds from the Foundation are helping with the clinical trials; money from the Foundation is also used for fellowship programs to help doctors working on Cooley's Anemia projects develop better transplant techniques, improved therapy and pay for more gene therapy work, he said.

kborsuk@greenwichtime.com