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First public cord blood bank set up here

New mums will be asked to donate umbilical cord blood

By [Natalie Soh](#)

ANOTHER lifeline will soon be provided for those with blood diseases, with the opening of Singapore's first public cord blood bank.

The bank will ask new mothers - beginning with those from KK Women's and Children's Hospital, where 40 per cent of births here take place - to donate their babies' umbilical cord blood.

The bank will then process, freeze and store the samples, to build a registry of at least 10,000 samples.

This will improve dramatically the chances that a patient who needs a cord blood transplant can find a suitable match.

Currently, about 70 per cent cannot find donors, but a bigger pool will mean eight in 10 patients will be able to find a match.

Currently, if a patient cannot find a match among family members, he has to hope for one from an unrelated donor - unlikely because most established public cord blood banks are in the United States and Europe, where donors are predominantly Caucasian.

This causes genetic factors to come into play, making chances of a match less likely.



There are two private cord blood banks here, but they store samples from donors who want a safeguard in case they need it in future, and samples are for use only by donors or family members.

Donors are charged fees for extraction, tests and storage, and this can work out to several thousand dollars.

The public cord blood bank will open its samples to anyone in need, including international patients. In return, Singapore will be able to tap into a global network of public cord blood banks.

Yesterday, Dr Fidah Alsagoff, executive director of the Singapore Cord Blood Bank - the first of its kind in the region - gave an insight into how it will operate.

Doctors will ask mothers to donate after delivery, and the bank will undertake to pay for all tests and storage. There is no risk to either mother or child. If a mother refuses, the umbilical cord, from which the blood is drawn, will be discarded as usual.

The only cost to the donor is that the family has no claim to the blood anymore. If the child needs cord blood later because he or she has developed a disease, there is no guarantee they will get the same sample back because it may have already been given out.

However, the child will be given priority if a match can be found, and the family will not have to pay the \$26,000 which the bank plans to charge for a unit of cord blood for transplantation.

Money collected from those requiring transplants will help recover the cost of storing and processing the blood. The public bank will be run as an independent, non-profit entity, said Dr Alsagoff.

The bank will set up its physical facilities and start freeze-storing cord blood by the last quarter of this year.

Although samples will initially be collected only from those at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, all public hospitals will be roped in eventually.



The two private cord blood banks here, StemCord and CordLife, welcomed the formation of the public bank.

Mr Steven Fang, CordLife CEO, said it will increase the chances of securing a suitable donor match for patients.

Dr Ang Peng Tiam, CEO of StemCord, echoed this and said the motivation for a private bank was very different.

'It's like a form of insurance for your child, or his sibling. If you need it, you know it's there. In a public bank, it's open to all in need.'

Cord blood is a rich source of what doctors call haematopoietic stem cells, or 'blank' immature cells that can become all sorts of blood cells: red, white or platelets.

These stem cells can regrow blood cells and replace diseased ones in patients who suffer from leukaemia or severe anaemia, for example.

Each year, there are 200 new cases of leukaemia here. More than half of these patients can benefit from such treatment.

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