

Media	Channel News Asia	Date	19 Jan 04
Section			

This story was printed from channelnewsasia.com



Title : Singapore to open S\$15m public cord-blood bank

Date : 19 January 2004 1835 hrs (SST)

URL : <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/66978/1/.html>

SINGAPORE : Singapore is getting its first public cord-blood bank: a new S\$15 million facility which, unlike a regular blood bank, will collect and store blood from the umbilical cords of newborn babies.

Why should you donate? Well, if you ever need a cord blood transplant later in life, you won't have to pay about S\$26,000 for it.

Nowadays, blood from the umbilical cord, harvested after a baby is born, is fast replacing bone marrow in transplants.

Called cord blood, it is rich in stem cells and it is easier to find a match than with bone marrow.

Cord blood has proven a life-saver in up to 80 percent of patients with leukemia, blood disorders and even some cancers.

The problem is it is not as widely available as doctors would like.

So Singapore's two public healthcare clusters, SingHealth and the National Healthcare Group, have joined hands to set up a cord blood bank by the end of this year.

The target is 10,000 donors, which doctors estimate will help save at least 120 lives a year.

The Singapore facility will be the first in Asia to be accredited by the widely-respected American Association of Blood Banks.

"Most of the accredited banks in the world are mainly Western-based; they have Caucasian babies mainly. We'd like to look at the Malays, Indians and Chinese. This group of patients will have less chance of a match in the bank in the US or Europe," said Associate Professor Patrick Tan, medical director designate of the Singapore Public Cord Blood Bank.

To get the bank going, KK Women's and Children's hospital, where 40 percent of Singapore's babies are born, will be asking mums-to-be to donate their their umbilical cords.

This donation drive will later be extended to other hospitals across the island, including private hospitals.



"After the birth of the baby we will be monitoring the babies for up to six months to ensure that they don't carry any rare genetic disorder, in which case we may not be able to use that particular baby's cord blood," said Dr Ivy Ng of KK Hospital's medical board.

Doctors hope 90 percent of mothers will agree to donate their umbilical cords.

As an extra incentive, if a donor later develops a medical condition which requires a cord blood transplant, she gets priority -- not just for her own cord blood but for any stored blood.

And it is free.

Other transplant patients have to pay S\$26,000 or about US\$15,000 for every unit of cord blood.

This is to cover the processing, screening and storage of the blood.

The bank will be funded by the two clusters and some other stakeholders.

So far the clusters have raised S\$1 million and it is estimated to cost between S\$600,000 to S\$1 million a year to run the bank.

The bank is expected to be up and running by the end of the year, either in KKH, SGH, or at the Biopolis.

But the clusters are confident they will recover the costs and break even.

Doctors hope that 90 percent of mothers will agree to donate.

It is estimated that 60 percent of donated cord blood will be suitable for use.

The other 40 percent, which may be rejected because of low stem cell dose, may then be channelled for stem cell research -- again with the mother's permission.

"We will be doing the usual screening of mothers of any infectious or genetic diseases. Subsequently, after the cord blood is collected we will process this and we will be doing investigations on the cord blood to ensure that it's usable for a patient who needs it," said Dr Ng. - CNA

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