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Cord blood unit holds out hope

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Clinical history was made at The Mercy Hospital in Werribee, Melbourne, on Easter Saturday, when baby Aiden Brundell donated his cord blood in the hope that his precious stem cells could one day rejuvenate sister Mikaela?s lungs, which are failing from cystic fibrosis (CF), and save her life.

Whether Melbourne keeps its tryst with miracle or not, Calcutta can draw hope from this first collection of cord blood from the sibling of a child with CF, for which there is no cure.

Singapore-based CyGenics Ltd, which made Aiden?s cord blood collection and storage possible free of cost through its Australian arm BioCell, is building a full umbilical cord blood tissue processing and storage facility in Calcutta.

The cell therapy major will set up the city facility through its division CordLife, which collects, processes and stores adult stem cells that may later become source for life-saving treatments. The city centre will enable parents to preserve the cord blood of their new-borns for a fee.

Steven Fang, CEO of the CyGenics group of companies, feels treating CF patients in Calcutta could also be possible in future through cord blood collection. The company, setting up the city facility at a start-up cost of $1 million, plans to kick off operations around June.

Bob Williamson, spokesperson for Cystic Fibrosis Victoria, says: ?Cord blood stem cells represent a real glimmer of hope for CF sufferers, with their potential to physically rebuild lungs previously considered damaged beyond repair.?

Latest research in Australia, Germany and the US shows that stem cells from cord blood can give cells that are very similar to lung cells. In a mouse model for CF, the cells help to cure the disease, according to Williamson.

?Although it?s a rare disease in our practice, there?s no escaping the fact that CF is often not diagnosed early and there?s very little awareness of the condition. The Australian case-study is encouraging, since cord blood stem cells are possibly the only true source of treatment for CF,? opines Suresh Ramasubban, consultant pulmonary specialist, Apollo Gleneagles Hospitals.

In Melbourne, at The Alfred Hospital, it has been shown that when lungs are transplanted into patients, they appear to take up stem cells from the recipient and integrate them into the airways, Williamson adds.

?The therapeutic potential for stem cells, in not only CF applications, are looking very promising,? says Ian Brown, chief operating officer of CyGenics.

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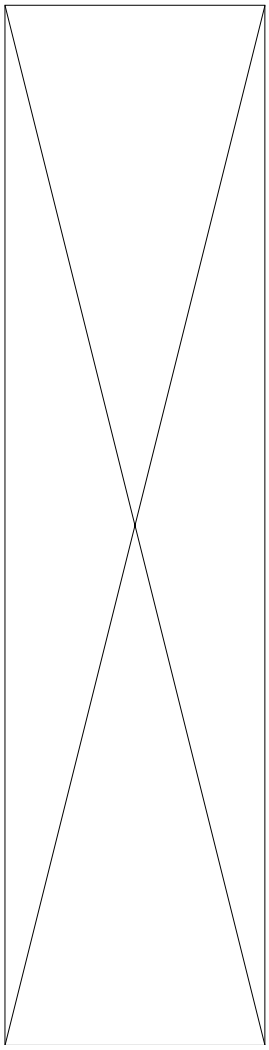

CF is a common life-shortening genetic condition. Many children with CF used to die in early childhood, but recent advances have extended life expectancy to 30 years and more. The disease primarily affects the lungs and digestive system, and causes a build-up of thick sticky mucus in the body, resulting in repeated lung infections and poor digestion.

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