

10 pay to store kids' cord blood against disease.

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by NATALIE SOH

It costs between \$2,500 and \$4,500 for service offered by local firm. But experts are still divided on such private banks.

At least 10 families here have agreed to pay thousands of dollars to store blood taken from their babies' umbilical cords, in the United States.

For between \$2,500 and \$4,500, local company CordLife deep freezes stem cells found in umbilical cords, as a precaution against the child or a family member developing a blood disease later.

Then, the stem cells can be used to treat a disease such as leukaemia because they can be turned into different blood cells, which can be transplanted back into the patient's body to grow new blood cells.

CordLife, which was launched officially at the BioMedical Asia Conference at Suntec City last week, told The Straits Times that its medical staff would be on hand at birth to extract a vial of cord blood to be sent to the US for processing.

There, samples will be kept cryogenically frozen for an annual fee of \$250.

Private banks like it have existed in the US, Europe, Australia, and Hongkong for several years.

Here, the Ministry of Health (MOH) licenses local clinics or laboratories which provide storage services. But CordLife said it did not need to be licensed because its labs are in the US.

Responding to questions at the BioMedical Conference, MOH director of medical services Tan Chorh Chuan said that while there had been no formal application from CordLife, regulatory bodies could not cover everything.

"If it falls under the definition of a clinical lab or provides direct patient services, it will need to meet certain regulations. Consumers also have to play a part - be discerning, exercise due diligence and ask questions," he said.

'IT IS A GOOD IDEA BUT IT'S FOR THE LONG HAUL. IF YOU WANT TO STORE YOUR CHILD'S CORE BLOOD, YOU MAY HAVE TO MAINTAIN IT FOR 40 TO 50 YEARS.' Professor Chan

Expert opinion on such banks remains divided.

Professor Chan Soh Ha of the World Health Organisation Centre in Immunology, at the National University of Singapore, called it a good idea but pointed out that the blood might have to be stored for up to 50 years. It was also not known, he said, how the cells would fare after a long time in cold storage.

Other doctors warned that if a child developed an inherited blood disease, his stored cells might also be defective.

Associate professor Patrick Tan, a director at the Centre for Transfusion Medicine (CTM), said that while it was "difficult to recommend that parents store their children's cord blood in private banks", he felt that public cord blood banks were worth supporting. Donations of cord blood are stored at these banks for any patient who needs to find a match for treatment.

There are about 1,000 frozen samples at the CTM and eight patients have received cord blood stem cell transplants, he said.

He added: "Cord blood should be anyone made available to anyone who needs it, regardless of financial means."

