

TODDLER NO LONGER IN CONSTANT PAIN

Georgia Conn, aged three, can now sit in a stroller and go for outings with her parents without crying from constant pain.

She can hold her neck up and look into her parents' eyes for a few minutes, without her head flopping over every few seconds.

These little acts that come naturally to other children are achievements for Georgia, who has cerebral palsy, in which part of the brain controlling motor functions has been damaged.

The result of an accident at birth that deprived her brain of oxygen, it left her with physical disabilities, communication difficulties and seizures.

Her parents – bank director Michael Conn, 38, and graphic designer Louise Conn, 36 – credit her progress to an infusion of her cord blood in September last year. She made the news then for being the first here to receive this therapy for cerebral palsy.

Cord blood, which is the blood that remains in the umbilical cord and placenta after birth, contains stem cells that can turn into a variety of cells. Scientists believe that the stem cells can



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After an infusion of her own cord blood, Georgia, three, seen here with her parents, can now hold her neck up for a few minutes at a time.

migrate to the brain, where they become neural cells and repair the damaged areas.

Georgia's pain threshold has been raised, her muscles have become stronger and she has become calmer, happier and more expressive, Mrs Conn said.

She said: "Initially, we couldn't put her in the stroller or car seat, because she was crying a lot. We thought: 'Gosh, we will never be able to leave our front

door.' But now, we can perhaps even go on a holiday."

The Australians, who have lived here for almost six years and are permanent residents, have another daughter, Sybilla, aged one, who is healthy.

They found out about this experimental treatment through their own research and planned to take Georgia to the United States to enrol in an ongoing study by Duke University.

But they realised it could be done here after CordLife, a private cord blood bank storing Georgia's cord blood, linked them to neurosurgeon Keith Goh.

Dr Goh, who is in private practice, said preliminary results from the Duke University study showed that the motor functions of children with cerebral palsy improved after they were injected with their own cord blood.

Even if the S10,000 infusion did not work, it would not harm Georgia as the cells were hers, he said. Dr Goh also treated a Singaporean boy with cerebral palsy. The Health Ministry gave the go-ahead for both cases.

Meanwhile, the Conns have not stopped there. A month ago, they took Georgia to a US clinic for a second infusion, using donated cord blood, at almost double the fee here.

But she still continues with physiotherapy, occupational therapy and an epilepsy drug.

Mr Conn said: "We are not looking at Georgia being cured by stem cells but just at making her muscle injury better. Our experience has been positive."