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Joint effort urged on stem cells

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Public hospitals have been urged to work with private companies to provide subsidised storage for umbilical blood – a source of stem cells that are being used to treat a growing number of illnesses.

Australian cell and molecular biology expert Robert Williamson said a public-private partnership would enable the government to set standards.

Professor Williamson was speaking at the inauguration of Hong Kong's second bank for blood taken from babies' umbilical cords, set up by Australian company CordLife.

While stem cells have been used for leukaemia bone marrow transplants for 15 years, much more had been learned about them in the past five years, he said.

"Scientists have realised that stem cells don't only exist in the bone marrow but also in the brain, the liver, the muscles."

He said the range of diseases that could be treated by stem cell therapy had grown greatly.

"There is some very active research at the moment on restoring heart muscle damaged by heart attack, and restoring the immune system when it's been damaged by chemotherapy or radiotherapy," he said.

Director of CordLife (Hong Kong) Simon Lee Moh-ming said only about 1,000 of the 50,000 babies born annually in Hong Kong had their umbilical cord blood stored, so there was much room for growth in Hong Kong.

The chief of service in the department of paediatrics at Prince of Wales Hospital, Li Chi-kwong, said he did not agree that every baby needed to have its cord blood stored as the chances of it actually being needed were slim.

He said stem cells from an adult's bone marrow also seemed to work on cardiac patients.