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FILE PHOTO: CYGENIC

More foreigners are storing cord blood in S'pore



LAB TECHNICIANS PROCESSING CORD BLOOD, which can be used to treat diseases including thalassemia and leukaemia.

FILE PHOTO: CORDLIFE SINGAPORE

Political stability, lack of natural disasters make Republic an ideal storage place

► **Melissa Sim**

THAI doctor Rattinan Treeratanana lives in Bangkok.

But when her daughter was born three years ago, she had blood from the newborn's umbilical cord extracted and sent to Singapore for storage.

She is not alone. Buoyed by an awareness that stem cells extracted from cord blood can be used to treat diseases including thalassemia and leukaemia, a rising number of foreigners from Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have put their trust in Singapore's two cord blood banks — CordLife and StemCord.

The companies, which process and store cord blood, have even set up marketing offices beyond Singapore's shores.

CordLife, which was set up in 2001, now has offices in Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia and India. The offices raise awareness by holding public talks and also arrange for cord blood samples to be sent to Singapore.

StemCord, too, has marketing arms in Indonesia and the Philippines.

While foreigners account for only 10 to 20 per cent of their clients, both companies said the numbers have been rising

dramatically over the last few years.

For example, StemCord has 180 Indonesian clients today compared to only five in 2003.

Meanwhile, CordLife has seen the number of foreign samples double every year, for the last two years.

Dr Rama Tjandra, a gynaecologist who practises at Pantai Kapuk Hospital in Jakarta, said: "In the past, I would collect about a sample every month. But this year, I've been collecting 10 samples a month."

He said his clients are mainly from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds who often find out about cord blood banks on their own. "We don't have the storage facilities here so we send our samples to Singapore for storage."

The transfer procedures are not complicated.

Dr Leong See Odd, the direc-

tor of StemCord, said the cord blood, drained from the newborn's umbilical cord while it is still attached to the mother's placenta, is contained in a bag and flown to Singapore via commercial courier service.

"The only problem is it has to reach Singapore ideally within 36 hours. Other than that, it doesn't require any special environment during the transfer," he said.

Today, StemCord stores a total of 6,000 units while Cordlife stores about 5,000.

The rise in demand is partly due to increased awareness of the uses of stem cells in the treatment of diseases.

Dr Leong said Singapore is a popular place for storage due to geo-political reasons.

"You don't want to be banking in a place with riots or unrest...Singapore is also safe from natural disasters. We don't have hurricanes that will

sweep your samples away."

CordLife's chief executive officer Jeremy Yee said the company is the only American Association of Blood Banks (AABB) accredited cord blood bank in South-east Asia.

"I think our clients understand the value of this accreditation, which has stringent rules on the standards of processing and storage," he said.

As an example, Mr Yee said unlike a non-accredited facility which may use air-conditioning, CordLife uses an air handling system which ensures the air quality in the lab is as clean as that in an operating theatre.

Dr Rattinan said CordLife's accreditation gave her the confidence to bank with them.

"It is important that the technology and the security of the lab is of a certain level because the stem cells have to be protected for a long time and you want viable samples at the end of the day," she said.

Cost is also not an issue for her. CordLife charges \$1,400 for the first year, which includes processing, testing and storage and \$250 for each subsequent year of storage. The courier service costs between \$300 and \$600.

This, said Dr Rattinan, is a small price to pay for her child's future: "It's not about the money. The stem cells are very precious and worth much more than the money you spend storing it. It's like buying a form of insurance."

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— DR RATTINAN

TREERATANANA (right) who had blood from her daughter's umbilical cord extracted and sent to Singapore for storage three years ago



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