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Health News

Umbilical Cord Blood Banking: India set to be key player

Arvinder Kaur, New Delhi, Nov 6: Cord blood is generally discarded after child birth, but it is a new borns biological insurance against disease. A two billion dollar market worldwide, cord blood banking is fast coming up in India, with many big players foraying into collection, isolation and storage technologies for cord blood stem cells.

India's first cord blood stem-cell bank, LifeCell, was launched two years back. Reliance Life Sciences too has entered into the field. Cryobanks recently announced setting up seven banks across the country.

Cord blood is the blood that remains in the umbilical cord after the baby is born and the umbilical cord is cut. Although once considered medical waste and thrown away, researchers have found that cord blood is rich in stem cells that are more precious than those found in the bone marrow or another part of the human body to treat diseases.

"Umbilical cord blood stem cells have already been effectively used in the treatment of sickle cell, leukemia, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, other forms of cancer, life threatening anaemia, and auto-immune diseases," says Dr Mrinalini Chaturvedi, Medical Director of Cryobanks.

Globally over 7000 cases of Cord Blood Stem Cell transplants have been reported and the list of diseases treatable by umbilical cord stem cells continues to grow. In recent years, cord blood transplants (CBTs) have become widely recognized as a safe, effective, and in many ways preferable, alternative to bone marrow transplant (BMT), according to Dr Naresh Trehan, well-known cardiologist.

In the very near future, these cells could be used to regenerate heart muscles and impact neurological disease treatment, says Dr Trehan. Parents of new-born babies can now store their childs stem cells from the umbilical cord of their newborn baby with a laboratory. Many therapies are expected over the next two to five years that promise cure for several diseases. And storage banks are also multiplying across the country, promising to store them at about half the cost in US.

However, Dr Trehan, advisor to one of the cord blood banks, says awareness among parents about storing the cord blood is still low. Such banks have been in existence in the west for last few years now. It was the right time to make a beginning in India.

The cord banks, meanwhile are looking at creating awareness among public and doctors about the potential of cord blood. We are looking to create awareness among general public of the revolutionary advancements in medical sciences as regards stem cell therapies, says Dhara Jaipuria, Chairperson of a cord blood bank.

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At present stem cell therapy is being done in India on a very low scale. The need of the hour is to have an effective stem cell transplant programme, says Dr Chaturvedi. With ethnic diversity and massive population base, India can be a key centre for cord blood stem cell storage in the world, she says.

Right now, the cord blood is being collected for those who want to store it, for a fee. But once voluntary donations start coming in, the data base could be expanded for use by others, both within and probably outside the country, says Dr Trehan. Since no ethical issues are involved, there should not be much problem in permitting its use for people needing it outside the country, he says. Cord Blood stem cell transplant is being seen as the future of medicine the world over. Last year President Bush signed into law a bill to underwrite stem cell research that does not harm donors, he says.

Storing a baby's cord blood stem cells gives a rare opportunity to the family to take advantage of the rapidly evolving medical technology associated with stem cell therapies. Cord blood stem cells are not just for the baby. It's really an investment for the whole family. Virtually half of siblings, and many in immediate family, may find a suitable match in the baby's stem cells, says Dr Chaturvedi.

An NRI is infact setting up a Registry of cord blood units for Indians and anyone needing cord blood can look for an match there, says Dr Trehan, noting, these are very positive developments which will help in such banks becoming popular with the people.

--- PTI

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