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Canada lags in setting up national cord blood bank, say specialists



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cord blood

Photograph by : Reuters/Luis Enrique Ascui

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OTTAWA - A national panel of organ transplant specialists has released recommendations for the creation of a national cord blood bank.

Their message: Canada is behind and needs to catch up.

The group of about two dozen experts and stakeholders has drawn up a rough strategy to set up a system to recruit donors and collect, store and distribute the blood from newborn umbilical cords.

Canada's provincial deputy health ministers have already agreed to the proposal in principle, and have asked a working group headed by Canadian Blood Services to submit a business plan in the new year.

Newborn umbilical cords were once considered medical waste but, in recent years, the stem cell-rich blood has become a valuable tool in fighting leukemia, immune diseases and inherited blood diseases. Researchers suggest cord blood also has potential to help repair damaged hearts and other organs.

In 2006, 45 Canadians were treated with stem cells from cord blood. The cords are solicited from expectant mothers before the birth of their babies.

Another 400 patients would benefit from stem cell therapy, but can't be matched to any of approximately 150,000 cord blood samples currently stored in banks in the U.S. and Europe.

So far, Canada has been able to purchase cord blood samples from other countries, said Dr. Graham Sher, CEO of Canadian Blood Services. But the uses and demand are expected to keep increasing.

"Now is the time to create the bank, not five years from now when the need is so much higher," he said. "We're at the point where it makes sense to create a Canadian bank."

It's estimated that the bank would cost about \$4 million to set up and about \$2 million to run every year. A cord blood bank isn't large - thousands of samples can be stored in one freezer room. But it's unclear if a Canadian bank would be run as a central location, or a network connected by a directory.

The panel recommended concentrating on collecting cord blood in three cities - Toronto because it has 22,000 births a year and a varied ethnic population; Vancouver because it has the country's largest Asian population; and Halifax, which has a significant black population.

So far, almost all cord blood recipients are children. With the development of "double cord" transplants for adults, which use two samples instead of one, as is the case with children, there will be growing market for cord blood, said Sher. The panel suggested that a Canadian cord blood bank might even become a source of revenue.

A cord blood sample accessed from an international source costs about \$25,000. Aside from concern about Canada's dependence on foreign sources, the transplant specialists fear banks outside Canada don't reflect Canada's ethnic diversity.

Creating a national bank would give Canada more control over the safety of the system, said Dr. David Allan, a hematologist at the Ottawa Hospital and a member of the panel.

"If we're not contributing we'll become more vulnerable," he said.

Meanwhile, Canada already has significant expertise in this area and some of the highest standards in the world, said Allan.

"It wouldn't take that much of a leap to begin collecting and storing cord blood."

Ottawa Citizen

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