

HNIs see net worth in stem cells

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BANKING umbilical cord blood as an investment to generate stem cells in future for treatment of possible life-threatening diseases is catching up across the country, though mostly in urban centres.

Rough industry estimates say that about 55,000 have already banked cord blood and cord tissue, and that the numbers across the country are expected to jump to 1.25 lakh in a year. Umbilical cord and cord tissue, which are generally discarded post-delivery, are now recognised as a rich source of stem cells that have the potential to treat over 75 serious ailments.

"Approval for full-scale trials for treating cerebral palsy and juvenile diabetes in the US using stem cell therapy has given a boost to cord blood banking," says Ajit Kumar, chief scientific officer of Chennai-based cord blood banking major LifeCell, pointing out that the possibility of extraction of stem cells from umbilical cord, as against the earlier option of foetal cells, has reduced the ethical concerns about this medical concept.

LifeCell claims 40% market share in the domestic cord blood-banking sector, which has half a dozen serious players, and feels that its capacity to store just over a lakh of cord blood samples could be used up soon. LifeCell had revenues of Rs 28 crore in 2008-09, which are expected to touch Rs 35 crore at the end of this fiscal.

Typically, cord blood-banking companies charge in the range

PRESENT SCENE

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of Rs 35,000 at the collection stage from a couple to airlift the cord sample to the processing centre and preserve it, and about Rs 2,000 annually for its upkeep using liquid nitrogen.

"Awareness is spreading fast in the country about the need to bank cord blood and tissue as an investment to combat future ailments within the family, when stem cells from these can be used for regenerative and therapeutic purposes," says R Niranjana, senior VP (sales and marketing,) of LifeCell. He says gynaecologists who do not recommend cord blood-banking to patients are now seen as not keeping with the times, particularly by patients in the metros.

For all the enthusiasm among the upwardly mobile youth in India to bank cord blood for their children and themselves, public cord blood-banking has yet to take off in the country. Says Ajit Kumar: "It has to do with the cost, and also with the fact that there is a high human leukocyte antigen (HLA) diversity in the country that makes a perfect HLA match difficult." For the present, therefore, it is all about personal decisions to bank cord bloods at the birth of your baby.

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