

Cord blood banking catching up now

"Bulk of donors come from upper middle class and middle class"

Ramya Kannan

CHENNAI: The numbers are still not staggering, but cord blood banking is certainly catching up more than ever before in the country and the State.

The process of collecting and preserving umbilical cord blood which is normally discarded after the baby is born has come to be seen by parents as an option, egged on by their gynaecologists and some media attention.

Private vs public banking

While private banking involves paying to store the cord blood for 21 years for the use of the individual or family in future, public banking involves storing the cord blood alright, but without the premium, and to be made available to anyone

who requires it and is a match.

An expecting mother must contact the bank during her pregnancy and enrol the baby's cord blood in advance.

Stem cell transplantation

"Diseases that were incurable over 10 years ago, today have a cure rate of 80 per cent with stem cell transplantation. Primarily in India, these are blood cancers and thalassemia, but the applications are increasing across a range of disorders," P. Srinivasan, chairman, Jeevan Stem Cell Bank, explains. Until recently, adult stem cells were the only source for transplantation in such cases, but over the years, cord blood has become the primary source, also because of the drastic

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drop in complications.

In addition, cord blood that is properly collected, processed/tested and stored can also be instantly used for transplantation whenever a recipient is found.

Jeevan Stem Cell Bank, started in March 2008, has so far received 264 cord blood donations, at least one from all but four States in the country.

The response has been steadily growing, Dr. Srinivasan says, with the bulk of donors coming from the upper middle class and middle class.

Magic number

It is hoping to touch the magic number of 30,000 donations which is the number an inventory should have for

an easy match to be found.

"We are also talking to the government of Tamil Nadu to see if public banking can be encouraged in State-run hospitals," he adds. Corporate involvement can enable the processing costs a public bank has to pay for.

With LifeCell, a private cord blood banking facility, the number of enrolments (by parents) has crept up to about 800 a month.

Revision of prices

"We revised our pricing downwards and we have seen an increase in the uptake since then," says Mayur Abhaya, Executive Director, LifeCell International. While in the beginning the only persons enrolling in the scheme were clearly in the

'rich' category, a lot of parents who are salaried employees are also participating taking advantage of the EMI scheme offered by the company.

"India has come a long way and people are now buying into the advantages of this new age therapy," says Ajit Kumar of LifeCell. Clearly it helps having celebrity endorsements.

Media attention

LifeCell believes riding the cord blood bank awareness campaign on the shoulders of actor Hrithik Roshan has drawn in more people. Media attention to children, who have benefitted from cord blood transplantations, have certainly helped, as has increasing awareness on the part of obstetricians and gynaecologists, Mr. Abhaya says.