

# **CORD BLOOD FEES 'WASTE' OF MONEY**

## **NZ Cancer Expert Questions Lifesaving Claims**

One of New Zealand's leading child cancer doctors is warning parents that paying to store their baby's umbilical cord blood is a waste of money.

Michael Sullivan, director of children's cancer research at the Christchurch School of Medicine, said the \$5000 cost would be better used to set up an education fund for the child.

Parents store the cord blood in case it can later be used to treat a range of diseases, but Sullivan said first-time parents were not getting independent information and faced pressure from other parents to store the cord blood. "There is no evidence storing cord blood can save a baby's life," he said.

The New Zealand College of Midwives agreed, saying it was concerned that private businesses were cashing in on the anxiety of first-time parents. It also said the cost was prohibitive. Midwifery adviser Lesley Dixon said there was a lack of unbiased consumer information and that there was no "relevant research showing it is useful in the long term".

Sullivan said cord banks worldwide used misleading advertising and displayed dubious ethics to encourage parents to store their baby's cord blood on the premise it could then be used to fight a number of diseases, or for various stem cell therapies. Cord blood is a mixture of primitive stem cells that can make blood and other tissue, such as nerves and muscle, if stimulated in the right way. CordBank, based in Auckland, is the only New Zealand cord blood bank. It charges a \$500 non-refundable registration fee, \$2000 for processing and \$2500 for storage for 18 years. It boasts "many thousands" of customers.

CordBank spokeswoman Kate Carter issued a statement to the Sunday Star-Times claiming that two New Zealand children whose blood had been banked with CordBank were successfully treated - one girl for a neuroblastoma and another for a birth-related brain injury. "And we have a number of children who have their cord blood stored with CordBank, whose parents are interested in them receiving treatment for type one diabetes and cystic fibrosis."

Carter also said new research indicated that as many as one in 2000 people will receive a stem cell transplant during their lifetime. "It is important that parents have access to up-to-date information in order to make an informed choice as to whether or not they want to be in the position to take advantage of the many developing technologies involving umbilical stem cells," Carter said.

She also said more than 50 children had been successfully treated with their own cord blood at California's Duke University. However, Sullivan said that was a clinical trial and so far the data is "very premature" and hadn't produced any real results.

Sullivan has had an article on cord blood banks published in leading international science and medicine journal Nature. In that article he said commercial cord banks offer a superfluous service and their existence remains controversial, because clinical evidence supporting cord blood storage is lacking, Sullivan said there were 150 private cord blood banks worldwide, with many of their websites duplicating details of "successful" case studies. He said his study had found 70 cases in which the baby's own cord blood was used in treatment procedures. "Of those, 50 were for a clinical trial and only three were used for the treatment of cancer."

While cord blood has been useful in treating leukaemia and lymphomas in children, Sullivan said it was important to remember that, in those cases, the patient's own cord blood could not be used for the procedure. "To treat leukaemia you need someone else's tissue so there is no benefit in banking the cord blood." He also said that, in the past 18 months, technology has overtaken the need to store cord blood. He said researchers have found a way to genetically manipulate skin cells, tricking them into believing they are a stem cell so they start behaving like one. The process is called "induced pluripotency".

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