

Stem cell storage available locally

I read with interest your front-page article on stem cells published April 17, 2006. I feel compelled to respond to it as a number of inconsistencies is evident. The information provided is not correct and potentially misleading to residents of Thailand that are interested in storing their own and their babies' adult stem cells. Cord Blood stem cells *can* be stored in Thailand privately with THAI StemLife as well as with the private arm of the Thai Red Cross.

Substantial public confusion is maintained by the incomplete knowledge of the media trying to report on stem cells and mostly, what we hear are the two words: stem cells.

The reports make us feel like a Pandora's Box has been opened on questions of ethics and morals. Still, most of the time the only question that needs to be answered is whether someone with incomplete knowledge, background and after incomplete research should be allowed to write scientific articles.

Adult Stem Cells (ASC), include Bone Marrow Stem Cells (BMSC), Umbilical Cord Blood Stem Cells (UCBSC) and Peripheral Blood Stem Cells (PBSC). ASC have limited but still wide potency and plasticity to develop to most tissues of an organism. The ability of certain tissues in the adult (bone marrow, skin, liver and bone) to repair and renew indicates the presence of stem cells in all of us. Human bone marrow is already transplanted since many decades, with proven therapeutic effects, and lately other ASC sources are being used.

Umbilical cord blood is therefore an excellent alternative and never-ending source of stem cells. It is collected within five minutes from the umbilical cord and

placenta after a baby is born, without any risk to the mother or baby. This blood that is normally discarded is rich in blood-forming cells. The cord blood is tested for viral, bacterial and fungal infections, frozen and stored at -196°C at a cord blood bank for future use.

The transplant process is the same as for marrow and peripheral blood stem cell transplants. To date, more than 6,000 cord blood (UCBSC) transplants have been performed, among which it should be noted that the first worldwide cord blood transplant for thalassemia was performed in Thailand in 1995.

Moreover, ASC bone marrow transplants, PBSC heart and diabetic ulcer injections are taking place in Thailand. So local expertise is indeed abundant in the Kingdom, in contrast to what the article implies. Cryogenic storage has since July 2005 been available for Thai parents in the Kingdom with THAI StemLife, the first private cord blood bank, that provides this service 24 hours a day, seven days a week to all pregnant mothers at every hospital in Bangkok and throughout Thailand. Thai parents do not need to send their baby's precious blood out of the country, which would mean that risks for cold-chain disruptions and thus destruction of stem cells would be imminent and real.

Furthermore, if those precious stem cells are needed, the patient would not have to fly to Singapore but can be easily treated in local hospitals in Bangkok.

THAI StemLife is also involved in research of both peripheral blood and cord blood stem cells. Prices are also not as expensive as the article implies. THAI StemLife charges 40,000 baht as an initial fee including first year storage and has 9- and 18-year packages, bringing down the prices to 4,000 and 3,500 baht per year, respectively. The information that storage cost is 10,000 baht a week is absurd.

Moreover, the cost of cord blood stem cells (UCBSC) from abroad (mostly Taiwan) for a bone marrow transplant is close to 800,000 baht if found to match, thus significantly more expensive than life-long storage for own use with THAI StemLife.

Stem cells present a fantastic alternative difficult to overlook and the existence of local storage facilities in Thailand makes it easy for patients to decide for future storage, provided they are presented with unbiased and correct information.

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