

## To fight diseases, Indians invest in umbilical cord blood

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by Hemlata Aithani

NEW DELHI, April 18 (Xinhua) -- Two years ago, three year-old Rishi Bhanushali was extremely anemic. He was suffering from Beta Thalassemia, a genetic blood disorder. He had to undergo blood transfusion every month since he was four months old.

But now it's a different case. The cheerful tot, from Bilimora in South Gujarat, western India, runs around, plays and eats well. He has grown taller by few inches and put on some weight as well.

He will not have to go through the ordeal of regular blood transfusion anymore for the rest of his life, thanks to cord blood banking. Preserved stem cells extracted from umbilical cord blood and placenta saved Rishi's life.

"We bought exact 6 by 6 match of Rishi's stem cells from Reliance Life Sciences (RLS). Dr. Sandip Shah transplanted the cells in him at Gujarat Cancer Research Hospital in Ahmedabad," said Rishi's grandfather Bhimji Bhai Bhanushali over the phone.

Rishi was hospitalized for about one and half months and for the remaining nearly two years the Bhanushalis had to remain in Ahmedabad "for the child's regular check up."

The entire treatment cost the Bhanushalis 1.5 million rupees ( 35,000 U.S. dollars) including 250,000 rupees (5,672 U.S. dollars) for buying stem cells. But they say "it is worth it" to have their "child back as normal".

For two-year-old Harshil Nanda, stem cells transplant is a " gift of life". It's been eight months since he got the transplant to cure Beta Thalassemia.

"For six months we haven't had the need to transfuse blood in him," said Ravi Nanda, Rishi's uncle when contacted through a phone. The Nandas, who have come from Jamnagar to Ahmedabad for treatment, also bought 6 by 6 stem cells match from RLS.

In both cases getting stem cells from bone marrow was difficult to cure the disease as it's rare to find 100 percent match of marrow stem cells between the donor and the

receiver, which is not the case with cord stem cells.

"Out of 1.1 million people there is chance of one percent match of bone marrow stem cells," says Ghazi Aasim, marketing head, Cryobanks India Private Limited, New Delhi.

Umbilical cord until recently was considered a medical waste which used to be thrown away once the baby was born. But various researches establish that umbilical cord and placenta could supply "the same kind of blood-forming (hematopoietic) stem cells as a bone marrow donor".

Stem cells are master cells from the donor which are transplanted into the child who is ill and these cells manufacture new healthy blood cells and enhance the child's blood-producing and immune system capability. These cells have far lower chances of rejection by the receiving body.

Cord blood cells are useful in curing diseases like leukemia, thalassemia, blood cancer, anemia, lymphoma, immune deficiency and other disease which can not be treated with medicines alone.

And research is on whether these cells can be used in treating Alzheimer's Disease, Cardiac Disease, Diabetes, Multiple Sclerosis and Parkinson's Disease. (more)

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