



Stem cell banks grow on hope of healthy dividend

Research Expands At A Fast Clip; Market Seen Exploding To \$540M By 2010

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AS PROGRESS in the area of stem cell research promises to dramatically change the way diseases are treated, Indians are turning up in large numbers at specialised 'banks' to store the body's master cells as a potential biological repair kit.

With stem cell technology promising to provide breakthrough therapies for conditions, such as

Parkinson's Disease, spinal cord injuries and multiple sclerosis, companies in the business of storing master cells see the domestic market for stem cell banking grow at 15% annually to \$540 million by 2010.

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), while most transplants have taken place from stem cells derived from the bone marrow, the trend will shift towards embryonic stem cells by 2015.

But cord blood stem cell banking

is generating huge corporate interest. Cryo-Save, Europe's leading stem cell bank, and Cordlife, a Singapore-based cord blood banking group, set up offices in India last month.

Stem cells act as building blocks of our tissue, blood and immune systems. They can be derived from bone marrow, embryos and the blood that remains in the umbilical cord after a baby is born.

"The 8-10 players in the market have been increasing capacity

steadily since 2007. India is one of the few countries in the world pursuing stem cell research. People who do not have diseases are also looking at banking options, solely as a biological insurance," said KV Subramaniam, CEO of Reliance Life Sciences, which has over 5,000 cord blood samples in its repository.

It costs Rs 70,000-1,00,000 to store stem cells for 21 years at private cord blood stem cell banks in India.

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BANKING FOR THE RICH

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No law on stem cell therapy

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WITH over 26 million births being registered every year, India is estimated to be the largest source of umbilical cord blood in the world.

"Gene therapy has a very long way to go and stem cell therapy will find its use in the near future. If surgery and pharmacy are two pillars of therapy, then stem cells will be the third pillar," said V Chandramouli, MD, Cryo-Save (India).

Chennai-based LifeCell, which has a tie-up with Cryo-Cell International of the US, facilitates preservation of stem cells at its Chennai facility. It has set up a laboratory on the outskirts of the city and has more than 30 centres now.

"The great response towards stem cell banking has led to the opening of a public cord blood bank in India, Jeevan stem cell bank. It is targeting collection of 35,000 cord blood units for public use," said Karan Goel, founder, Stem Cell Voice of India, a non-government organisation which works to create awareness of stem cell therapy and banking.

At present, there are seven private cord blood banks and one public cord blood stem cell bank. However, opinion is divided on research into hu-

man embryonic stem cells, which can differentiate into almost all types of body tissues and have the potential to treat a large number of diseases. According to Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) guidelines, only embryos up to 14 days old can be used for therapy and they should not be generated for the sole purpose of obtaining stem cells. And only surplus or spare embryos can be used after obtaining the consent of parents.

"We are dealing with trial situations, but soon it may become alternate therapy for cases like spinal cord injury, motor neurone disease and multiple sclerosis," said Ramananda Nadig, president, Clinical Research Education and Management Institute. Cord blood banks must also focus on strong R&D to facilitate transplants and work in tandem with hospitals. There is no legislation governing stem cell therapy in India, but ICMR had spearheaded the formation of guidelines for stem cell research in 2007.

"Stem cell therapy is still at experimental and research stages. With respect to cord blood stem cell transplants, we haven't seen significant transplant cases in India," says ICMR principal scientific officer Geeta Jotwani.

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