

**7DAYS**

## What every parent should know

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Stem cell research has acquired a bad name because most people associate the practice with the use of embryonic stem cells and - considered un-ethical by many religions and cultures. But did you know that there are lots of different types of stem cells - ones that don't derive from embryos - that are vital to developing life-saving treatments for a wide range of chronic illnesses?



Apart from embryos, stem cells can be extracted from bone marrow and from fat, but the best source is from the umbilical cord blood of a newborn baby - the stuff that is usually disposed of after birth, so using it is completely moral. Even the Catholic Church's Pope Benedict XVI sent a memo out last year giving stem cell research from cord blood the thumbs up - his church is wholeheartedly against any use of embryos in research.

To find out more about the incredible potential of these stem cells found in cord blood, we caught up with Professor Colin McGuckin at Arab Health Week.

McGuckin is an Irish professor of regenerative medicine, who along with a team of researchers in the UK has just developed the first-ever artificial liver grown

from umbilical cord blood stem cells.

"With cord blood we are the first in the world to have developed a liver from umbilical cord blood stem cells, an insulin secreting pancreas and also nervous tissues from the brain. "What we are doing now is applying this research to see if it is possible to treat people with our developments shortly," says Professor McGuckin. "The potential to treat numerous common and life-threatening diseases is enormous. These youthful stem cells found in cord blood are the building cells of the body and they have the capacity to adapt to an environment and help develop and build what ever is needed."

Stem cells derived from cord blood can potentially treat more than 75 life-threatening conditions and those who benefit from saving these cord blood stem cells are the family, and most especially the child from whose umbilical cord the blood originally came. Sometimes people outside a family can also be a match for saved cord blood.

But the problem, worldwide, is that few parents are aware of the option to preserve their babies cord blood and also many countries are not equipped with the special blood banks that can preserve the blood for up to 20 years. In Dubai there are two options available to save cord blood. One is at the cord blood bank at the Al Wasl Hospital and the other is at a recently opened private blood bank by the name Cryo-save. Professor McGuckin says that every parent should consider it.

"There is nothing complicated about taking cord blood. It's simple and no risk to the mother or child. Every single member of my team has been trained to do it and it takes about five minutes," says Professor McGuckin. "If you have a child and store the blood, that blood will be around for a long time to come, incase it is needed. If you do not store then that child's options are more-limited if they get sick."

In Dubai it costs approximately dhs13,000 to save umbilical cord blood for 20 years with Cryo-save. Those that cannot afford this are still urged, however, to donate to public cord blood banks. "I would urge people to save cord blood or donate to public banks if you can't afford to store it, because at a later date, if your cord blood is still in the public bank there is a high chance of getting it back should you need it," says Professor McGuckin.

"Statistically, the more cord blood in the bank, the more chance of matches there are for people that need it." Saving cord blood does sound like a sound biological investment. Apart from already making massive progress in the treatment of diabetes Type 1, strokes, leukemia and certain cancers using cord blood stem cells, Professor McGuckin and his team say they also hope to discover a treatment for 'bubble gum children' - children that have lost their immune systems and have to stay inside pressurised bubbles because if you touch them they die of infection.

"All it takes is a few minutes after a baby's birth to collect these precious cells, but unfortunately not enough parents know that this could be an option for them," says Professor McGuckin. "It's not good enough just putting a brochure in a doctor's lab, we need to really be putting the message out there for people to consider."

"Preserving cord blood could save many lives and lots of money in the very near future."

**For those interested to know more about cord blood banking, Cryo-Save Dubai hosts antenatal sessions explaining everything you need to know about cord blood stem cells at Favourite Things, Palm Strip Mall in Dubai. English sessions are at 10am the first Tuesday of every month. Arabic sessions are at 10am the second Tuesday of every month. Contact 04 360 4410 for more information.**

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