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Cord-blood donations fight disease  
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Dwight Brunoehler, 56, president and chief executive officer of Cryobanks International Inc., an Altamonte Springs company that specializes in the collection and storage of umbilical-cord blood for use as potential treatments for leukemia, sickle-cell disease and many other conditions.

He spoke with staff writer Harry Wessel.

Question: What's so important about umbilical-cord blood?

Answer: It contains a particular stem cell called a hematopoietic progenitor cell. . . . It makes red cells, platelets and plasma. . . . It's similar to a bone-marrow transplant.

Q: How hard is it to persuade parents to donate cord blood?

A: Surprisingly difficult.

Q: Why?

A: There are 4.1 million live births in the United States each year, and out of all the things that you can do with your cord blood, about 21/2 percent or less of that gets used. There's a compounded problem in that the biggest need for cord blood is among ethnic minorities.

Q: Why is that?

A: [Ethnic minorities] don't tend to donate as much, and therefore there is not a pool of cells available to them in as large a quantity.

Q: If someone wants to donate cord blood, what should they do?

A: We accept donations from anywhere in the continental United States every day of the week, every day of the year. There is another program in town, at Winnie Palmer Hospital [for Women & Babies], which is an excellent program.

Q: Is there a toll-free number people can call?

A: 1-800-869-8608.

Q: You're not a doctor or a scientist. How did you become involved in this area?

A: This started out as a clinical and andrology [cellular processing] lab and infertility lab in late 1993. I'm probably the most voracious reader you'll ever meet, and I ran across a government study talking about stem cells from cord blood, and how they could be used to replace immune systems.

Q: Are you or your company affected by the controversy over stem-cell research?

A: No. Only in that it takes us more time to explain to people this is not a controversial source of stem cells.

Q: Is there a short version of your explanation?

A: Sperm and egg have not united here. . . . With cord blood, there is no controversy, because they are simply blood-forming cells. They have the ability, we believe, to go on and form all the other tissue there is, and that is a subject of quite a bit of clinical pursuit.

Q: What are the prospects of Orlando becoming a major biomedical cluster?

A: Orlando is going to be the hub of the country, I believe. I think that the local politics play well to it. There's a team spirit in this town that you don't seem to find in many other states.

Q: You mentioned you're a voracious reader. Is it all scientific stuff?

A: By 5:30 in the morning I've read the Sentinel cover to cover, including the obits, because I grew up here. . . . I read The Wall Street Journal cover to cover by that time. And then I come into the office. I have a clipping service that I pay quite a bit for, and I read somewhere around 50 to 75 articles that have been collected worldwide about this specific topic every single day.

Q: What fiction are you reading at the moment?

A: I just finished the new Jeffrey Deaver novel. . . . It's quite a diversion for me after trying to figure out all these long words every day, like hematopoietic progenitor.

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