

Donate lifesaver: umbilical cord blood

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Reworking Rochester: Health

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GUEST ESSAYIST

Two years ago, when my wife was pregnant with our second child, a friend informed us about the option of donating umbilical cord blood to a public cord blood bank. We were thrilled to celebrate our daughter's birth by making this potentially life-saving donation.

Nearly two decades ago, researchers discovered that the blood left in the umbilical cord after a birth is a rich source of blood-forming stem cells and can be used as an alternative to bone marrow in stem cell transplants. This discovery has provided a new source of hope for thousands of people diagnosed with cancer or other severe blood or immune system disorders. While a bone marrow transplant requires an extremely close tissue-type match between patient and donor, a stem cell transplant using umbilical cord blood can be successful without a perfect match, making cord blood a life-saving resource for patients unable to find a compatible bone marrow donor.

According to the National Marrow Donor Program, which maintains the world's largest listing of volunteer bone marrow donors and cord blood units, 70 percent of patients do not find suitable bone marrow donors within their families, and more than 6,000 individuals search the NMDP Registry every day, looking for an unrelated donor or a cord blood unit.

Cord blood, which was formerly discarded, is now used in the treatment of close to 70 diseases, including leukemia, lymphoma and sickle cell anemia. The NMDP reports that about 20 percent of patients who find a compatible match through its registry receive cord blood that was donated to a public bank and that the number of cord blood transplants facilitated by its registry is increasing.

Umbilical cord blood collection is simple and risk-free. The blood is taken from the discarded placenta and umbilical cord after the birth in a procedure that does not affect the birth experience and presents no risk to the mother or child. The collected cord blood can then be stored and is ready to be used immediately when needed.

All too often, I hear parents say that they would have donated if only they had known about the option. Last year, I proposed the Cord Blood Stem Cell Notification Law, legislation at the county level to promote cord blood donation awareness. On Aug. 1, Gov. Eliot Spitzer signed legislation that requires the state Department of Health to develop a public education and outreach campaign to promote awareness about public and private cord blood banking.

New York is poised to become a leader in cord blood research. Last fall, the state provided \$10 million to establish the New York State Cord Blood Science Institute, which will be one of the largest facilities of its kind in the nation.

Cord blood donation offers hope to the thousands of patients unable to find a bone marrow donor and also offers hope for the discovery of treatments and cures for dozens of life-threatening and debilitating diseases. This law will help ensure that all New Yorkers are aware of this simple, life-saving act.

Heider, D-Brighton, represents the 14th District in the Monroe County Legislature.

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