

Blood ties

The European parliament has a vital role to play in increasing awareness of cord blood stem cell collection, writes **Alojz Peterle**

Over recent years, major research advances have been made in cell therapy and regenerative medicine. Hematopoietic (blood) stem cells have been proven to be very effective in treating several disabling diseases, and many clinical trials are currently ongoing, providing good hope for more treatments in the future.

Cord blood stem cell collection has the advantage of posing no health risk to either the mother or the child, and is one of the most important and readily available sources of stem cells to date. These cells are present in the blood of the umbilical cord linking the child to the mother's placenta. This blood is collected from the cord after birth with no harm to the mother or the child. With over 130 million births around the world every year, cord blood is perhaps the largest source of stem cells in terms of availability and access, without ethical controversy.

Yet, with over five million births in the European Union, according to the European Registry for Organs, Tissues and Cells, only around one per cent of these births result in cord blood collection. This is mainly due to insufficient information that future parents receive about the advantages of umbilical cord blood stem cells and about the choices that they have between donating for use by other patients or research, storing for potential family use or discarding. This choice is no doubt a right which belongs to parents and their children since, unlike the case of organ donation, they are aware of their decision and in good health.

EU citizens are becoming increasingly proactive, seeking to be constantly informed, as far as possible on a personalised basis, about the best treatments and medicines available. In this perspective, the European parliament can raise political awareness by requiring an extensive collaboration with, and combined engagement from, EU and national authorities and medical practitioners. Increasing the availability of umbilical cord blood stem cells requires also better collaboration and information exchange between parents, medical practitioners and the stem cell banks.

Political institutions and, more specifically, the European parliament, have the responsibility to facilitate and encourage such communication, to the benefit of society as a whole



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while considering human and citizen rights at the same time. Politicians also need to observe changes in society and the economy, and update their decisions in kind.

The reason why some of my colleagues and I have been encouraging more debate in the European parliament on the issue of cord blood stem cells is that we noticed an improper balance between, on the one hand, the pace of scientific findings and the public and private actors active in this field and, on the other hand, the level of information to parents and the current availability of cord blood stem cells.

Indeed, there are many differences in the way member states encourage collection of cord blood stem cells and report about their availability. In some cases, only the public repositories are declared, while the private ones are not covered. This might be due to the assumption that no functional system can be devised whereby mutually beneficial cooperation and exchange between the public and the private sectors can be engaged.

My colleagues and I are confident that tailored solutions can be devised to increase availability and to also have updated and objective statistics concerning the number of stem cells stored. This would not only benefit EU patients but also strengthen the EU research capacity in this area. Although the first transplantation using cord blood stem cells has been performed in Europe, the EU seems to have been overtaken by the US and Asia as far as research results are concerned.

The first step to increase availability of cord blood stem cells is to inform parents that they can have a unique opportunity to potentially improve the life of children and patients, or to contribute to research advances that could improve lives in the future. The European parliament can and should raise awareness of these issues and make the first step to facilitate this process. ★

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