

Cord blood donors in isles are sought for their diversity

By Nina Wu
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Before giving birth to a healthy baby girl at the hospital four years ago, Chelsea Gorman of Kaneohe agreed to donate her cord blood. It was simple to do and free.

After the umbilical cord was cut, her doctor at Kaiser collected the blood for the Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank. The mother of two

had almost forgotten about her delivery gift until late last year, when she learned that the cord blood donation turned out to be a match that was successfully transplanted into a 39-year-old woman fighting leukemia.

"It's a pretty incredible feeling that something that you could do in the throes of your own personal

Please see CORD, D3



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Dr. Randal Wada, a pediatric oncologist, is the founder of the Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank.

CORD

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happiness ... (could) years later be a lifesaver for somebody else," said Gorman, a 33-year-old stay-at-home mom. "It was pretty awe-

some."

She shared the news with her daughter Jemma — the child born when Gorman donated her cord blood — as well as with family and friends, and then made a special certificate commemorating the occasion to put in her scrapbook.

Cord blood, like bone marrow, is rich in special stem cells used in transplants for patients with fatal diseases including a wide range of cancers and blood disorders, such as leukemia.

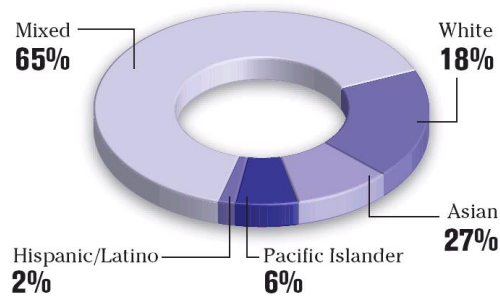
Gorman's cord blood was used in the 183rd transplant from Hawaii donors since 1999, according to the Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank. Isle donors have provided matches for patients across the U.S. and Australia, Turkey, Spain, Italy and France. Recipients ranged from an infant to a 67-year-old. July is Cord Blood Awareness Month.

WITH its ethnic diversity, Hawaii's population is uniquely positioned to help the world, according to pediatric oncologist and Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank founder Dr. Randal Wada.

"I think we're in a special position because there aren't any places in the country that have the kind of

2015 TRANSPLANTS BY ETHNICITY

Ethnic distribution of transplanted units. Cord blood is banked at the Puget Sound Blood Center in Seattle.



Source: Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank

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diversity that we have," he said. "It's kind of our gift, but also our challenge to find matches for our own patients."

Hawaii's population of Asian, Pacific Islander and mixed ethnicities provides cord blood donations that are in high demand worldwide because patients who are minorities and of multiple races have the most difficult time finding matches.

According to a 2013 study of Census Bureau data by the Pew Research Center, Hawaii has one of the smallest populations in the country — 1.4 million people — but the sixth-largest multiracial population, with 330,000 people. Hawaii's population is so diverse, the study found, that it is the only state in which the largest multiracial group is considered tri-racial — white, Asian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

(Gorman fits that demographic: She's a mix of Asian, Pacific Islander, white and Hispanic.)

DURING routine deliveries, the cord blood is collected after the umbilical cord is clamped and cut. A needle is placed into one of the umbilical cord's veins, and the blood flows into a collection bag. There is no pain involved for mother or baby. The procedure takes less than five minutes, according to Dr. Allison Shigezawa, an OB-GYN in Honolulu whose patients have provided 12 matches for transplants.

"It doesn't hurt the baby at all," said Shigezawa.

Cord blood can be col-

lected regardless of delivery method. Even with delayed cord clamping, a growing trend, Shigezawa said, cord blood can still be collected. It can also be collected following a C-section operation.

If not donated, the cord is typically discarded after delivery. Some parents also opt to privately bank the cord blood for the family's future medical use, for a fee. Shigezawa offers information about public cord blood donations to patients a few months before their due date. "Cord blood is so much easier to match than bone marrow," she said. "Most people are happy to do it when they know there's no cost and it could be a match that could really help somebody. If everyone did cord blood donations, we'd never have to do bone marrow transplants, because it's so much easier to match."

To make the process more convenient, expecting parents can fill out an abbreviated form to donate cord blood at the time of admission to a hospital. If enough cord blood is collected, then doctors obtain a small blood sample from the mother to screen for infectious diseases. If the cord blood unit is successfully banked, they will be contacted for further information on family history.

LOGISTICAL problems currently limit donations to Oahu and Maui, where the Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank estimates that 16 percent of all births result in a donation. But many become unusable. In 2014 and 2015 the Hawai'i Cord Blood Bank averaged 103 units of donated cord blood but was able to bank only an average of 23 units a month after they were screened, said Linda Watanabe, the bank's administrative manager. Blood clots, low cell counts, packaging errors, consent issues and positive tests for infectious diseases all contribute to the loss.

And the bank has only 42 hours to ship the blood to Bloodworks Northwest in Seattle, where it is entered into the National Marrow Donor Program's database and banked. A late arrival can't be used, Watanabe said.

Cord blood is also gaining popularity for cellular therapy, according to Wada, to treat conditions like cerebral palsy, autism and stroke.

Cord blood is collected at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children, the Queen's Medical Center, Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, Tripler Army Medical Center, Castle Medical Center and Maui Memorial Medical Center.

"Definitely, the positives greatly outweigh the negatives," said Gorman. "Why you wouldn't do it would be mind-blowing to me."

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