



## Cord Blood Banking: Marketing Before Medicine?

The advertisements for [cord blood banking](#) appear in magazines, online, in doctor's offices and on Facebook. Oftentimes, an expression of interest by expectant parents prompts an invitation by private banking companies to a fancy informational dinner.

ABC News sent a producer with a hidden camera to one of these informational dinners to investigate what expectant parents are being told -- and found the benefits of cord blood banking may not always match the pitch.

"You have this one-time opportunity," said Dr. Albert Sassoon, an obstetrician-gynecologist in New York, at an informational dinner for expecting parents. "If I was doing this today, I would definitely bank the cord blood, no doubt about it."

Many consider it science on the cutting edge: Umbilical cord blood rich in stem cells obtained once a child is born can be used to treat rare conditions and holds promise for the future. And with 4 million births in the U.S. each year, private cord blood banking is a growing industry.

In their marketing material, many banking firms tout an impressive list of 70 to 80 diseases that purportedly are treated by stem cell transplants. However, research has not yet proven that stem cells from cord blood work for all of the listed conditions.

"Presently, we treat over 80 life threatening diseases," said Sassoon, who was present at the dinner sponsored by ViaCord, a private cord blood banking firm. "With the amount of diseases that we treat today, by the time you reach the age of 70, you'll have approximately the chance of receiving a stem cell transplant -- one in 200, one in 217."

But many experts told ABC News that the chance that anyone will benefit by their own cord blood -- which is what is stored in private cord banking -- is much lower than that.

"The chance of somebody needing their own cord blood is extremely, extremely low," said Dr. Machi Scaradavou, pediatric oncologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York and medical director of the New York Blood Center's national cord

blood program.

In fact, Sassoon's statistics provided to a crowd of many parents-to-be comes from a 2008 study published in *Biology of Blood and Marrow Transplantation* that included a variety of stem cell transplants from bone marrow and other sources. The stem cell transplants were not specific to cord blood.

Leukemia is among many of the diseases listed in ViaCord's marketing material as treatable by stem cell transplants. But for children with leukemia, their cord blood stem cells may carry the same disease, so its use is not recommended. However, doctors may be able to use their siblings stem cells if the parents have stored them in a private bank. If not, many doctors turn to public banks for treatment.

Cord blood can be banked two ways -- in public banks for use by anyone in need whose tissue type is a match, and in private banks where it is only available to the family of the child who donated. The likelihood of matching cord blood for most children in a public bank is greater than 90 percent.

Sassoon told ABC News he found the 90 percent match rate through public banks "surprising."

Like some doctors who facilitate private cord blood



PUBLIC COPY PROTECTED BY PATENT # 7,811,111

PRINT POWERED BY



banking, Sassoon said he is compensated each time he collects his patient's cord blood. When asked if he disclosed his monetary affiliation with ViaCord, Sassoon responded, "If they ask me -- yes." However, American Medical Association guidelines object to physician compensation when patients donate cord blood. "Physicians shall not accept financial or other inducements for providing samples to cord blood banks," according to the [American Medical Association guidelines](#).

### Banking on a Future Unknown

Cord blood is marketed for two uses -- as a treatment for diseases including leukemia and sickle cell disease, and as a potential source of cells for regenerative medicine, a cutting-edge field of medicine studying how to repair tissues damaged by everything from heart disease to cerebral palsy.

"I think the science is very far along with respect to cardiac indication and cardiac regeneration on our laboratories," said Morey Kraus, chief scientific officer of ViaCord, in response to whether experimental treatments should be marketed as a potential benefit of private banking.

Besides paper ads and Internet sites that promote private banking, companies like Cord Blood Registry (CBR), the largest private cord blood banking firm, also hire real parents to attract future customers.

"It is a program of CBR moms that are passionate about cord blood," said Tom Moore, CEO of Cord Blood Registry. "They simply spread the word."

However, unlike private storage of a newborn's umbilical cord blood, which can range from \$2,000 to \$3,000 up front, plus yearly storage fees of \$85 to \$125, public cord blood banking is free and is entered in a public system where the cells are available to anyone who needs it.

In fact, the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends public banking over private, favoring private banking only when there is already an affected family member or a disease in the family that would benefit from a transplant.

"The utility of umbilical cord blood stem cells is greater when the donation is to a public rather than private bank," according to [American Medical Association guidelines](#). "Therefore, physicians should encourage women who wish to donate cord blood to donate to a public bank if one is available. Doing so will result in greater availability of stem cells to patients from minority populations." Still, firms such as ViaCord and Cord Blood Registry are banking on

many parents who believe that their child's stem cells may one day treat chronic conditions.

"I think the hope is there, because if you didn't store them you could never do the research on them," said Moore.

But while many firms market private cord blood banking as a hedge against the future when cord blood stem cells may be used to treat more diseases, most experts say it is still too early to tell.

