

Umbilical cord blood donation hailed

Donor program unveiled in Delaware for transplants, treatment of diseases

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Sarah Kuhl was wide-eyed and a bit startled by applause for her at a news conference Tuesday at Christiana Hospital.

The guest of honor even had a little spit-up on her face.

And, having only been born Nov. 19, she didn't understand a word as elected officials and medical leaders called her a lifesaver and a pioneer donor.



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Kim Kuhl holds Sarah, her 3-month-old daughter. Sarah was one of the first to donate cord blood for a program unveiled Tuesday at Christiana Hospital. "I want my daughter to grow up knowing she can do something here in Delaware and help people everywhere," Kuhl said.

She's helping cancer victims and other critically ill patients -- even before her first steps -- because her parents, Kim and Arthur of Wilmington, donated her umbilical cord so its blood can be used for transplants.

Anywhere in the world.

The Kuhls were among the pilot donors in the state's first public program, unveiled Tuesday, to collect cord blood. The blood is rich in stem cells used to treat more than 40 critical diseases.

As Kim Kuhl patted Sarah on her shoulder, she said she's thrilled the baby is starting life helping others. When Sarah is older, the Kuhls plan to tell her about how she helped start Delaware's free, public banking of lifesaving cord blood.

People may think cord blood is gross, she said, but "it's 100 percent amazing" reuse of what's otherwise medical waste.

"We have more than 7,000 babies delivered every year at Christiana Hospital," said Dr. Robert Laskowski, Christiana Care Health System president and chief executive officer. Most of their cords could be donated to save lives, he

Q&A

Q: Why save umbilical cord blood?

A: It is rich in stem cells, used in transplants to treat cancer and other diseases.

Q: Does it hurt mother or baby?

A: No. It is done after the cord has been cut.

Q: Is it complicated?

A: It is a safe, simple five-minute process done by doctors, midwives or nurses.

Q: Is it expensive to have it done?

A: It is free to all donors.

Q: What happens to the blood?

A: It is processed, tested and stored at a blood bank and matched through a global data bank for transplants.

Q: Is every unit used for transplants?

A: Some aren't viable for transplants, but can be used in medical research.

Q: How can parents donate babies' cords or learn more about the program?

A: Contact the Brady Kohn Foundation at 765-2875, early in the

said.

pregnancy, or visit www.thebradykohnfoundation.org.

The extreme diversity of babies born there will be a bonus, officials said, because minorities are underrepresented in the current global supply of stem cells.

The vision for miracles

The program -- supported by state lawmakers, New Castle County Executive Chris Coons and U.S. Rep. Mike Castle -- grew from the collaboration of a grassroots foundation, nurses, other hospital personnel and New Jersey blood banks.

But Castle, a stem cell research advocate and new head of the Biomedical Research Caucus, was among many who said the program wouldn't exist without Carolyn and Andrew Kohn.

Coons called them "people with the vision" for miracles.

The Kohns began the Wilmington-based Brady Kohn Foundation, named for their son. As a toddler, he had a rare bone marrow disorder that was treated with cells from cord blood banked after his birth in 1999. "Unfortunately," his mother said, "his immune system was compromised and we were unable to save him." Brady died in 2002.

Hoping to save other lives, foundation President Gary DeVicci said, the group's volunteers helped start the pilot project two years ago at the hospital to solve medical, legal and logistics issues. In fall 2005, the pilot paired with the Elie Katz Umbilical Cord Blood Program at Community Blood Services in Paramus, N.J.

That not-for-profit blood group is covering the average \$842 per cord for processing, storage and other costs, said Community Blood Services president Dennis Todd.

'People helping people'

In a string of personal ties, Coons said he was glad to back the effort, having grown up with Andrew Kohn, a fellow trumpet player, near Hockessin.

Coons, a Democrat, said his father has leukemia, so he personally thanked Castle, a Republican, for national leadership supporting stem cell research.

Personal links also got the Kuhls involved. They learned of the cord blood program from the Kohns, while both couples had toddlers in the same play group.

"This really is people helping people," Sarah's mother said. "And I want my daughter to grow up knowing she can do something here in Delaware and help people everywhere."

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