



Jan/Feb 2009

Waco Tribune-Herald

wacotrib.com

PRINT THIS

Powered by Clickability

Click to Print

SAVE THIS | EMAIL THIS | Close

Central Texas couple plan trip to China for treatment to help their 1-year-old daughter to see

```
var buzzSiteID = 'waco_tribuneh140'; var articleURI = location.href; var articleLocation = articleURI.replace(/(http:VV.*?V).*?(V.*)/, '$1services$2'); var yahooBuzzArticleId = buzzSiteID + ':' + articleLocation;
```

Sunday, January 11, 2009

By Van Darden

Tribune-Herald staff writer

A Central Texas couple is willing to travel halfway around the world in hopes that an experimental therapeutic procedure unavailable in the United States will help their young daughter see for the first time.

Jason and Rosetta Fedelem, of Temple, plan to travel to Hangzhou, China, on March 4 so their 1-year-old daughter, Sierra, can undergo a new therapy that uses stem cells taken from post-birth umbilical cord blood.

The treatment, which can cost upward of \$50,000, is not performed in the United States. The Chinese Ministry of Health, however, has accepted the use of umbilical cord stem cell therapy and anecdotal evidence of the treatment's success has spread across the globe like wildfire.



The Fedelems are raising money for the trip through donations and fundraisers and have about half the needed funds.

"Honestly, we don't know if this will help," Rosetta Fedelem said. "But this is our baby. And we'll do everything we can to help her."

Sierra was born in September 2007. A compressed umbilical cord and meconium (a waste that babies usually expel after birth) that backed up in her lungs prevented her from breathing. As a result, she suffered brain damage from a lack of oxygen.

Central Texas couple Jason (left) and Rosetta Fedelem watch their 15-month-old daughter, Sierra, at their home in Temple. The Fedelems plan to travel to China in March for a cutting-edge stem cell therapy that may give Sierra a chance to see. (Jerry Larson

"The doctors had little hope for her," Jason said. "In the past, most of the babies born in her condition were institutionalized. The doctors said she'd never be able to walk, talk, see or eat on her own."

Rosetta recalled being immediately unsatisfied with the doctors' assessments.

photo)



The Fedelems have held silent auctions and other fundraisers, including this event at Zack and Jim's Hog Creek Ice House in Speegleville, to offset the \$50,000 therapy and travel expenses to go to China for surgery so their daughter can have a chance to see. (Jerry Larson photo)

“When the doctors told us that there was nothing more they could do, we said, ‘We can’t accept that,’ ” she said. “So we started researching our options.”

Desperate for other answers, the Fedelems began frequenting Internet chat groups dedicated to spreading information and discussing possible alternative treatments for disabled people. Through these forums, they were introduced to a cutting-edge procedure that involves injecting stem cells directly into a patient’s blood stream.

Unwilling to consider the use of stem cells culled from aborted fetal tissue, the Fedelems’ research led them to a Chinese biomedical technology company called Beike Biotechnology Co.

“The more research we did, the more we found that stem cells from aborted babies can cause problems,” Rosetta said. “But Beike is different. They use cells from umbilical cord blood.”

Beike Biotech

Since 2005, Beike Biotech has provided stem cells to hospitals for the treatment of more than 3,700 patients, said Beike International Medical Director Dr. Kara Zhang in an e-mail. The Shenzhen-based company is the largest provider of stem cells for

clinical treatments in China.

Zhang said her company does not advertise in the United States.

“Usually American families learn about our treatment from other families,” Zhang said. “We try to let the patients speak for us through their blogs, press and word-of-mouth.”

Through the fall, the Fedelems have been raising as much money and awareness as they can. In September, relatives and friends of the Fedelems gathered at Zack & Jim’s Hog Creek Icehouse for a daylong, band-filled fundraiser.

Jason said other fundraisers are planned for this month and February.

The couple, who just received their passports last week, plan on staying in China for about a month so Sierra can receive the recommended number of treatments.

They will go first to Shanghai, where some missionary friends will help the couple arrange travel to Hangzhou.

Rosetta described the process as uncomplicated: The child stays at Zhejiang Xiaoshan Hospital through the treatment and is injected with stem cells once a week, while doctors monitor her condition.

“A baby’s umbilical-cord blood is a rich source of stem cells,” Zhang said. “These cells are the basic building blocks of the human body and are able to transform into other types of cells.”

The doctors make sure the mother — and the umbilical cord — is healthy.

“Every woman who enters the hospital in China to give birth is automatically tested for all major diseases, including hepatitis and HIV,” Zhang said.

The doctors then take the blood and put it through a rigorous process of removing the appropriate

stem cells.

“The stem cells are never frozen,” Rosetta said. “They’re kept fresh. Freezing diminishes their effectiveness.”

Each injection contains about 15 million stem cells. The cells attach themselves to injured cells and take over their functions.

Zhang said Beike primarily treats spinal cord injuries, muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy, but it cites more than 20 other conditions successfully treated with stem cell therapy, including blindness and hearing loss.

Great expectations

The basic idea behind the treatment — injecting stem cells into the body with the hope that they will attach to and repair damaged tissue — is seen as promising by mainstream doctors in the United States.

For example, scientists are preparing to mount such trials using adult stem cells at the Texas A&M Health Science Center College of Medicine Institute for Regenerative Medicine at Scott & White Hospital in Temple. Their hope is that the therapy can help improve conditions such as diabetes and Alzheimer’s disease.

But the treatment method has not yet been proven effective in humans, cautioned the institute’s director, Dr. Darwin J. Prockop. He also noted that the work his team is doing is different from Beike’s because his team does not use stem cells from umbilical cord blood. Work done with umbilical-derived cells has not been as encouraging as that done with adult stem cells, he said.

Prockop also expressed concern about Americans going to China for treatment, saying facilities there tend not to be top-notch.

“The chances of (stem cell therapy) working in China are not really good,” he said.

Sierra’s doctors at Scott & White declined to comment on the treatment plan, citing confidentiality restrictions.

Despite concerns about the treatment’s success, the couple is forging ahead with their trip preparations, relying on their faith, family and friends for support.

The couple are members of Grace Community Church in Waco, and their pastor, Jay Mathis, said his church has rallied behind them.

“Of course they’re getting our prayer support,” Mathis said. “And a couple of families have organized benefits for them. The church itself has made a commitment in the budget for them. Bottom line is we feel like this is their primary option to give Sierra a chance to see.”

Even without the therapy, Jason and Rosetta say prayer and faith have dramatically improved Sierra’s condition.

Sierra, whom the couple refer to as their “miracle baby,” has begun to eat mashed and liquefied solid foods, an improvement the couple hopes to expand on with treatment.

“Already her muscle tone has improved,” Rosetta said. “She has likes and dislikes. She can’t really cry, but she lets us know when she’s unhappy. All of this we attribute to prayer.”

The Fedelems will continue to raise funds through their Web site, www.sightforsierra.com.


Staff writer Cindy V. Culp contributed to this story.

vdarden@wacotrib.com

757-5743

Find this article at:

<http://www.wacotrib.com/news/content/news/stories/2009/01/11/01032008wacChinaGirl.html>

 **Click to Print**

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 Waco Tribune-Herald. All rights reserved.

