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Cord blood saving lives



Heidi Swajanen of Eben Junction holds her daughter Breanna, who is now six months. Swajanen donated Breanna's umbilical cord blood to a public cord blood bank that stores the blood, which is rich in stem cells, for life-saving transplant procedures. (Photo courtesy of Heidi Swajanen)

By KRISTEN KOHRT, Journal Staff Writer

MARQUETTE — At six months old, Breanna Swajanen already has the potential to save someone's life. In fact, she was born with it.

When Heidi Swajanen, Breanna's mom, was four months pregnant, she came across an article on umbilical cord blood donation and decided it was something she wanted to do.

Swajanen, 39, of Eben Junction, was connected through the Michigan Blood Bank with Florida-based Cryobanks International, a company that collects, processes and stores cord blood. They sent her information, a questionnaire and a kit with instructions for collecting the blood after the birth.

Swajanen said the process was easy and hopes more expectant mothers become aware of this option.

"The most time consuming part was filling out the questionnaire," she said.

Cord blood contains stem cells that can produce other cells that carry oxygen, can help fight disease and stop bleeding, according to the Cryobanks International Web site. When cord blood is donated, the cord is clamped and cut in the normal way. However, instead of discarding the blood in the cord, it is collected and preserved for future use. The stem cells in cord blood can be used in transplant procedures for as many as 75



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diseases.

Jeanine Willard, 68, of Marquette, knows exactly how beneficial cord blood donations can be. When her son, Michael, was diagnosed with a rare type of cancer, he required a bone marrow transplant — marrow is another source of stem cells necessary to fight disease. But out of 10 million bone marrow donors registered worldwide, none of them matched Michael. That includes the 600 local people who donated to try to match him.

Finding a match with cord blood, however, was not nearly as much of a problem because the need for a perfect match is significantly less than it is for bone marrow. Cord blood is also less likely to be rejected by the body.

“Umbilical cord blood is why Michael is alive today,” Willard said.

Since seeing its life-saving potential first hand, Willard hopes more people will become informed about what cord blood is, why it is so valuable, and the option of donating it.

“I would hope that when doctors see a mother to be, they start asking from day one, would you like to donate cord blood to save a life?” she said. “If doctors aren’t asking, we have to get mothers to start asking. (By donating), they’re not only bringing in a life, but they’re saving another life as well.”

Dwight Brunoehler, CEO and founder of Cryobanks International, said his group tries to do everything they can to make the process of donating as easy as possible for the mother and the doctors.

“We try to take the burden on ourselves so (the mom and dad) can go back to what’s more important, their baby,” he said.

Brunoehler said about 8,000 cord blood transplants have been done, a majority of them for children with leukemia. Cryobanks, which is the second largest cord blood bank in the world, has 9,000 registered donors.

Doctor of obstetrics and gynecology Dee Hubbard said donating cord blood is not a common practice in the area, but that patients are becoming increasingly interested.

Hubbard, who practices at OB/GYN Associates of Marquette, said she has performed the procedure to extract the cord blood but so far has only done it for patients who wish to store the blood privately. She is open to helping women who want to donate publicly, as well, she said.

“We’re happy to help out,” she said. “(We’ve) always been supportive of donating.”

Swajanen now looks forward to explaining the donation to her daughter and the fact that her blood could potentially save a life.

“It feels wonderful and I can’t wait till Bree is older and I can tell her, ‘that’s what you did,’” she said. “Somewhere someone is going to get help. I cannot wait to tell her.”

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