

At baby shower, a medical pitch

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Storage of cord blood for fee urged

By Sarah Schweitzer, Globe Staff | July 29, 2008

WELLESLEY - On a recent evening, at an event billed as the "Ultimate Baby Shower," two dozen pregnant women and a few male partners mingled at the Wellesley Club overlooking Lake Waban. They sipped alcohol-free "mocktails," feasted on a buffet of roast chicken and potatoes, and ogled products that were to be raffled off - luxe strollers, high-end infant car seats, and custom photography packages with black-and-white samples showing voluptuously pregnant women hugging their bodies.

But before the raffle launched, the expectant parents got a sales pitch from Kimberly Dever, a South Shore obstetrician. Reading from a PowerPoint presentation prepared by ViaCord, Dever said cord blood, a source of stem cells harvested after birth from the umbilical cord, could be used to save their children's lives should they develop some life-threatening diseases, such as leukemia. And the future potential use of cord blood, she said, was possibly immense. "In 2020, who knows?"

She advised the women to carefully consider storing their cord blood with a company like Cambridge-based ViaCord, the evening's primary sponsor, which charges \$2,195 in upfront fees and \$125 each additional year.

"You just never know," said Dever, who was paid \$500 by ViaCord for making the presentation. "Cord blood is like life insurance."

But a growing number of leading doctors and medical organizations question the utility and expense of privately banking cord blood, which they say currently has limited applications, such as treating certain rare blood cancers and blood disorders in children, and that more research is required before other uses are discovered. They advocate, instead, a public system in which cord blood is donated for no cost and accessible by all people in need.

Private "storage of cord blood as 'biological insurance' should be discouraged," states the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"Private storage of [cord blood] for future use by the newborn is not routinely recommended," states the American Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation, which estimates the chance of privately banked cord blood being used for transplant as "very small, probably as low as .04 percent to .001 percent in the first 20 years of life."

For two decades, cord blood has been an intriguing frontier in medicine, with hopes that it one day will be used to treat diseases by regenerating tissue and other means. Research into its potential uses continues. But cord blood successes have not matched early expectations.

More than two dozen private companies have nonetheless sprung up offering storage of cord blood for a fee. Some doctors say the companies are preying on the anxieties of expectant parents.

"Many private cord blood companies use misleading advertising focusing on fears of new parents and implying that cord blood could provide a cure for serious diseases we all worry about," said Joanne Kurtzberg, director of Duke University School of Medicine's Pediatric Blood and Marrow Transplant Program and a leading cord blood researcher. "I don't mind if someone says that there is a potential for this or that. But I have trouble if they imply that they can cure all the things we are afraid of."

ViaCord says it accurately portrays cord blood banking.

"It is the responsibility of the company to be fair and balanced," said Jim Corbett, president of ViaCell Inc., which runs ViaCord. ViaCell has been wholly owned since 2007 by PerkinElmer Inc. of Waltham.

But, he said, the possibility that future research could unlock vast lifesaving potential in cord blood is increasingly appealing to prospective parents.

"We believe it's good for parents to make informed decisions," Corbett said. "People have taken their health into their own hands these days. The science of stem cells continues to evolve at a rapid pace."

ViaCord says that of the 160,000 units of cord blood stored at its facility in Kentucky, 119 have been requested for treating children with diseases such as leukemia or sickle cell anemia - or about .07 percent. Corbett said that the donors whose cord blood is stored by ViaCord are young, and that requests for transplant could increase as donors age.

"That's my suspicion," Corbett said.

The company points to doctors such as Yoni Barnhard, vice chair and director of obstetrics at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York, who assert that the wider potential uses of cord blood, particularly in the area of regenerative medicine, could be realized in as little as five to 10 years.

"When talking to couples about umbilical cord blood, I think caution is certainly important, but from another perspective, it's possible that some of the organizations that determine policy are not forward thinking enough," said Barnhard, whom ViaCord recommended to the Globe for an interview. ViaCord and Barnhard said they have no financial relationship. "I think there is enough evidence to present to a couple that cord blood banking is here."

Expectant parents who want to bank cord blood at a public facility can do it at the UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester. A private company, Cryobanks International, based in Florida, will, in some cases, publicly bank cord blood collected at other hospitals in Massachusetts if a request is placed before the 34th week of pregnancy.

The recent gathering at Wellesley College was one of a series of similar events ViaCord has held in New York and Connecticut. The invitation was circulated by Boston-area retailers, including Magic Beans, a baby supply chain in Brookline, Wellesley, and Hingham, which enticed expectant parents with promises of food and "incredible raffle prizes and a fabulous gift bag."

Corbett said such events are one of many "consumer platforms" the company uses to reach consumers. Combining the cord-blood information session with giveaways and promotions of other products, he said, is a helpful tool for new parents.

"An expectant mother who is going through pregnancy for the first time is looking at a variety of things for the first time," he said. "This is just a forum that gets people together."

Dever, the doctor who gave ViaCord's pitch, has been practicing obstetrics for 11 years and said she banked the cord blood of her last child. She said she does not endorse any particular company, including ViaCord, when explaining cord blood banking to her patients.

It is "a valid scientific practice" and "not a crock," Dever said in an interview after making her presentation.

She added, "You never know what will happen in your children's lives or in your family."

A number of expectant parents who attended the Wellesley event said they were impressed with the ViaCord presentation made by Dever.

"When you hear everything, it makes you think," said Caryn Dombrow, a 30-year-old mother who is expecting her second child.

David Rice, of Roslindale, a 35-year-old assistant manager at Starbucks, who attended the Ultimate Baby Shower with his wife, Jennifer, a 33-year-old site coordinator for an after-school program, said they were still weighing the pros and cons of storing cord blood, but came away from the evening thinking the option was well worth consideration.

"It's like they said - it's insurance," he said. ■