

Metro

Family support instrumental Umbilical cord collection program to bear Daniel Berger's name

BY SUSAN JACOBS

Associate Editor

When Daniel Berger was battling lymphoma and leukemia, his wife and five sons asked friends, neighbors and colleagues to sign up for the international registry that matches stem cell and bone marrow donors with recipients.

Eventually a match was found, and Berger received two stem cell transplants, and was showing significant signs of improvement when his heart failed. He died on July 2, 2006 at age 73.

Now, to memorialize him, his family is contributing toward an umbilical cord collection program at Magee-Women's Hospital. The Dan Berger Cord Blood Program would encourage mothers and doctors to donate the umbilical cords of newborn babies instead of discarding them, as is usually done.

Blood from the cords, which contain stem cells, could then be extracted and stored in one of three storage banks in the country.

"They should have started this a long time ago," said Carol Berger, Daniel's wife. "It's really important. It's going to be the way of the future."

Magee is one of a few hospitals in the



Daniel Berger

country that are beginning such collection programs, said spokesman Arthur Scully. A hospital in Chicago has been collecting umbilical cords and doing research for some time, and a hospital in Boston is beginning a collection program.

Magee was exploring the option of beginning its own program when the Berger family approached the hospital and offered to help with funding.

"When the family came along it definitely sparked our interest," said Scully. "It gave us the impetus to start full force."

Some \$300,000 over three years will be needed to get the program running. After that, since recipients or insurance companies will pay for the transplanted cells, the program is expected to be self-sustaining. In addition to the money they are contributing, the Bergers are asking others to donate to the program.

A kickoff event for the program is being held at Magee on Monday, Oct. 8, at 10 a.m.

The program comes at a time when the benefits of stem cells are still being explored.

"There is so much research being done," said Scully. Magee has the largest hospital research center in the United States devoted specifically to women and infants, he said.

Magee has been collecting cords on a smaller scale for research for some time. Last year, there were between 150 and 200 donations out of 9,500 deliveries at the hospital.

"We see great potential for growth," said Scully.

Cells from the donated cords may be used for research locally at Magee or be sent to the three national banks, where they will be available for stem cell transplants. These donations will be catalogued according to 10 matching factors and entered into the same international system, which now keeps track of adults

who have provided a tissue sample to indicate their willingness to donate bone marrow or stem cells if they are a match for someone who needs a transplant.

Eventually, families will have the option of paying to put cord blood into storage for private use, should the need ever arise.

Because stem cells can develop into any other type of cell, they are useful in treating a variety of diseases and conditions. Some 70 diseases are now being treated with stem cell transplants, said Scully.

"The beauty of this is the physician can focus on the needs of the mother and infant while a professional extracts blood from the cord," said Scully.

Magee will train personnel to do the extractions from the cords, and is working with the Central Blood Bank of Pittsburgh to hire a recruiter who would educate parents and doctors about the importance of the donations.

Carol Berger said that it is especially important for Jews and other minority groups to donate to such programs.

"We lost 6 million [in the Holocaust]," she said. "There are lots of people who don't have matches."

Daniel Berger, who was a trial lawyer, would have appreciated the good work of the cord donation program, said his wife.

"It means that in the long run many people's lives will be saved," she said.

(Susan Jacobs can be reached at sjacobs@pittchron.com.)

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