



New partnership signals better access to life-saving stem cell treatment for patients

NHS patients with diseases such as leukaemia, lymphoma and sickle-cell anaemia are to benefit from better access to potentially life-saving stem cell therapy thanks to a new multifaceted partnership announced today.

Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (CUH) has joined forces with Virgin Health Bank (VHB), the leading independent cord blood bank, to collaborate on a range of initiatives which will improve the availability of cord blood banking and stem cell therapies for both current and future patients. The ground-breaking agreement is the first of its kind between a private cord blood bank and an NHS Foundation Trust.

Cord blood is the blood that remains in the umbilical cord after a baby has been born. It is a rich source of stem cells which, once collected and processed, can be used in therapies.

VHB provides new parents with educational information about cord blood banking ensuring that they are empowered to make truly informed choices about the options available to them. Mothers delivering babies at the Rosie Hospital will be able to contract with VHB to have the cord blood of their newborns collected and stored rather than it being discarded as is the current practice. If mothers do choose to store their baby's stem cells they will be also able to donate some of them to VHB, who as part of this agreement, will gift CUH access to the donated cells free of charge. This will increase the number of stem cell units available for transplant and improve the likelihood of finding suitably matched units for patients.

Another element of the partnership will see CUH provide VHB with high quality cord blood processing, cryopreservation and storage services, together with all associated testing from its nationally accredited laboratories at CUH. CUH will benefit from this aspect of the partnership by generating additional revenue for the hospital through the service fees that it will charge VHB.

Dr Rajan Jethwa, Virgin Health Bank's Chief Executive, said: "This agreement is of immense importance within the context of the UK healthcare economy. It is a testament to the vision of both Cambridge University Hospitals and Virgin Health Bank, who together have created an innovative partnership which will benefit patients and, most importantly, the development and availability of stem cell units for transplantation in the UK and worldwide.

"The NHS has already used stem cells from Virgin Health Bank in a successful transplant for a child with sickle-cell anaemia. That child is now cured and we hope that, through this partnership, we will be able to contribute to improving the quality of life for patients and saving more lives in the future."

Dr Jag Ahluwalia, Medical Director with CUH, said: "This collaboration builds on our reputation as a leading centre for stem cell research, and is a wonderful opportunity to increase the access which patients have to potentially life-saving stem cell therapy.

“But the benefits of this partnership are not limited to NHS patients in the UK. Under the agreement, we will also register all of the cord blood units on an international bone marrow registry, hopefully helping to save lives locally and further afield.”

“Dr Mike Scott and Dr Craig Taylor, the scientific leads at CUH stated that this is a wonderful opportunity which in the future has the potential for wider application to provide therapeutic tissue to replace diseased or damaged tissues in patients with conditions such as diabetes, degenerative neurological disorders and cardiovascular disease.”

Sir Richard Branson, Founder of the Virgin Group, commented: “Virgin Health Bank was established to provide families with a high quality service through which they could store their baby’s cord blood stem cells and support the NHS by enabling them to donate some of those cells to others in need. The partnership with Cambridge University Hospitals will further the development and availability of stem cell transplants, and is a great example of what can be achieved through collaboration between businesses and the public sector.”

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Note to editors:

1. Virgin Health Bank is owned by Qatar Foundation, the Excalibur Group and the Virgin Group provides cord blood stem cell banking services to families. It operates in the UK and in Qatar, where it has established the first cord blood stem cell bank focused on helping to meet the chronic need for stem cells that exists within the Arab community. Sir Richard Branson and the Virgin Group have pledged to reinvest any profits which they make from Virgin Health Bank to further the development of stem cell therapies. For more information, visit: www.virginhealthbank.com
2. Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (CUH) is one of the country’s largest and best known NHS trusts. It delivers care to the local community through its hospitals Addenbrooke’s and the Rosie and is a leading national centre for specialist treatment. CUH is a government-designated comprehensive biomedical research centre and one of only five academic health science centres in the UK. For more information, visit www.cuh.org.uk
3. Currently stem cell units used in allogeneic transplants (unrelated donors) are sourced via an international registry on which available units are listed. In July 2010 the UK Strategic Stem Cell forum estimated the average cost of obtaining a stem cell unit for transplant to be £36,000.