

Catholic hospitals donate cord blood

ALLENDALE, N.J. - A New Jersey health care initiative has reached its goal of getting Catholic hospitals in the state to donate umbilical-cord and placenta blood for adult stem-cell research.

During a March 9 press conference at the Elie Katz Umbilical Cord Blood Program facility in Allendale, Archbishop John J. Myers of Newark and Father Joseph Kukura, president of the Princeton-based Catholic HealthCare Partnership of New Jersey, reported on the progress of an alliance among 10 Catholic hospitals that provide obstetrical services.

The statewide stem-cell initiative, which is being steered by Father Kukura, was launched in May 2006. The Allendale facility will serve as a station to collect the hospitals' biological material for ongoing research.

"I am here to say that the first stage of the initiative has been accomplished. Our nine-month initiative was to get 10 Catholic hospitals involved (with adult stem-cell research). The Catholic Church is in favor of stem-cell research, but only one kind (embryonic) is problematic to our moral tradition," Father Kukura explained.

Archbishop Myers deemed the initiative "a model in the state and throughout the country" for adult stem-cell research.

He said Father Kukura was invited to Rome by Pope Benedict XVI to address the issue of providing "innovative ways to preserve human life."

"I applaud the efforts of the hospitals, staff and patients for understanding the importance of cord and placenta blood donation, and for the increasingly important and productive role in the field of stem-cell research," the archbishop said.

"Efforts like this partnership among the Catholic hospitals in New Jersey, Community Blood Services and the Coriell Institute for Medical Research will truly advance the goal of finding cures for diseases without sacrificing human life," said Archbishop Myers, who toured the Elie Katz facility following the press conference.

Dennis M. Todd, president and chief executive officer of Community Blood Services, said the organization has collected 750 units of cord blood through the state's Catholic hospitals in New Jersey.

Of those units, 180 have qualified for transplant, he said. "We ship all over the world and overnight to treatment centers. These cells are used to treat people with lymphomas, immune deficiencies and other disorders. Out of the 41 units we have transferred, 30 have been from Catholic hospitals in this state."

Out of those who received the stem-cell treatment, 68 percent are now in good health, including a 60-year-old woman who was diagnosed with leukemia, he said.

The Elie Katz Umbilical Cord Blood Program facility is one of the first centers in the nation to use procedures that have just been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for private and public stem-cell storage.

Research aimed at better ways to store units and how to get the word out to more donors, including the minority population, is an important component of the initiative, according to Todd.

Democratic Assemblyman Neil Cohen, who has supported adult stem-cell research since its inception, has been a key figure in building an alliance between government officials and Catholic hospitals.

"Developments in stem cells are changing every hour. This is the pathway to cures and healing in the future," he said.

Democratic Sen. Loretta Weinberg also is a supporter of the adult stem-cell research alliance. "As a widow of a cancer victim, a mother and a grandmother, I look forward to a time for other families to find other cures," she said.

Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk believes educating pregnant women is key in advancing adult stem-cell research.

"With education, we can stop the wasting (of umbilical-cord and placenta blood)," said Vandervalk, who is a Republican. "I have files filled with success stories. It fills me with awe of the potential we have here."

Although adult stem-cell research has proven results, a lack of federal funding could endanger the future of using and collecting umbilical-cord and placenta blood. Under a 2005 law, \$15 million per year should be given toward funding such research in 2007-10. However, President George W. Bush proposes only \$2 million in funding for umbilical-cord research and storage.

Cohen called the limited funding “sad” and “extremely foolish,” adding “the government needs to step up to the plate if they want to be a part of a medical revolution.”