In the news

ENSURING A GOOD COLLECTION

Use of umbilical cord blood stem cells for the treatment of diseases such as leukaemia, and the speculation of future regenerative therapies, has led to a dramatic increase in the collection of cord blood at birth for storage in public or private cord-blood banks. However, concerns have been raised over how these samples are collected. Now, for the first time, this will be regulated in the UK.

Marketing aimed directly at parents has raised fears that samples may be taken by untrained individuals, or that the process may distract the doctor or midwife's attention. The Human Tissue Authority (HTA) has laid out new rules, stipulating that collection must only be carried out by qualified persons on premises meeting determined standards.

As Professor Peter Braude, Chair of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' (RCOG's) expert committee on Umbilical Stem Cell Banking, explains, "collection conditions can influence the likelihood of stem cells being obtained from the umbilical cord blood samples collected" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/> 30 April 2008). The RCOG recommends that collection be made by a trained third party uninvolved in the birth. Adrian McNeil, chief executive of the HTA, clarified the organization's aims: "We are introducing this regulation to make sure that the best quality samples are taken in the safest way" (<http://www.independent.co.uk/> 1 May 2008). The HTA also aims to ensure that the samples are traceable from collection to use.

Although the utility of autologous cord-blood storage has yet to be demonstrated, the new policy will ensure at least that no harm is done. It is certain that the effect of the new rules on the number and quality of samples submitted to public cord-blood banks will be monitored with interest by health authorities elsewhere.

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