



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Umbilical Cord Blood - Link to Life**  
**Birthing Families need to know they have the power to help save lives**

Focus groups with African-American and Hispanic women delivering at Mercy and Mt. Sinai Hospitals in Chicago showed that birthing families in these communities are eager and able to donate their umbilical cord blood, when they know it is a free and painless option. These results were published online in the peer-reviewed journal, *Transfusion*, on December 29, 2009, setting the stage for an innovative pilot effort to increase cord blood donations at these hospitals.

According to Brenda Reyes, focus group coordinator and lead for HealthConnect One's cord blood project, pregnant women are often made aware of private banks which charge a fee for storing umbilical cord blood for the family's own use, but most families are not aware they can donate their umbilical cord blood – at no cost – for life-saving treatments. As one focus group participant states, "What would prevent me from donating is not knowing about it. Not knowing... How can you donate it, if they don't tell you about it or inform you...?"

Umbilical cord blood cells can be used currently to treat over seventy diseases, such as leukemia, lymphoma, sickle cell, multiple sclerosis, and osteopetrosis.

According to the National Marrow Donor Program, only thirty percent of patients in need of a marrow or blood cell transplant find a matched donor in their family. The other seventy percent turn to the public bank, which relies on the generosity of birthing families who have decided to donate. ITxM Cord Blood Services is the Public Bank in Illinois where families can donate their umbilical cord blood for free.

Furthermore, because tissue types are inherited, patients are more likely to match someone from their own race or ethnicity. Therefore, special attention must be given to providing information to ethnic minorities.

The National Marrow Donor Program reports that in 2008, 7% of the umbilical cord blood donations nationally were from African-Americans and 17% were from Latinas. However, live births among African-American and Hispanic women in 2007 accounted for 14.5% and 24.6% of all live births.

"While it is clear that umbilical cord blood transplants offer the possibility of cure to many patients with leukemia, the availability of matched units for minorities continues to lag that of Caucasians. The [*Transfusion*] report provides a starting point for all in the field of cord blood banking and transplantation to understand more about this disparity and more importantly, how to begin to remedy it," says Dr. Patrick Stiff, Coleman Professor of Oncology for Loyola University Medical Center and Director of Loyola's Cardinal Bernardin Cancer Center.

The focus groups were part of a larger project launched by HealthConnect One in 2008 to address this disparity in the availability of cord blood for ethnic minorities. With support from The Coleman Foundation and input from a wide array of partner organizations, HealthConnect One has now developed an outreach toolkit for community health workers such as prenatal educators, family case managers, and doulas. Coming on the heels of the *Transfusion* report, January marks the beginning of a three-month toolkit pilot at Mercy and Mt. Sinai Hospitals in Chicago, accompanied by site-specific staff trainings at Westside Association for Community Action, Access Community Health Network's Kling Clinic, and Mercy Hospital and Medical Center.

"I cherish every single day and give deep heartfelt thanks to the anonymous cord [blood] donor. Simply donating their baby's umbilical cord [blood] gave another child, my son, 'life!'" shares Cassie Colyer, the mother of a transplant survivor treated at Children's Memorial Hospital.

According to Kathleen A. Casey, President and Founder of Bear Necessities Pediatric Cancer Foundation, "12,500 children will be diagnosed with pediatric cancer this year; many of those will need stem cell transplants but will not find related donors to make that possible. Thanks to cord blood donations they may find their donors and life. Please consider giving life by donating umbilical cord blood to those suffering from life threatening illnesses like pediatric cancer."

To donate umbilical cord blood in Illinois, contact ITxM Cord Blood Services, by phone at 1.877.GIV.CORD, or visit their website for more information, at [www.givecord.org](http://www.givecord.org)

*HealthConnect One (HC One)* is a nationally recognized nonprofit training and technical assistance agency that uses innovative, community-based approaches to support direct-service providers in promoting the health of mothers, infants, and families. The organization trains community health workers, develops community-based initiatives, and mobilizes diverse stakeholders to build for policies and programs that improve maternal and child health.

*The Coleman Foundation* is a private, independent grantmaker focusing primarily on the Midwest. Foundation resources support Cancer care, treatment and research; Disability Services; and Education – with a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship. Since 1981, the Foundation has been an active advocate for raising the standards of cancer care in the Chicagoland area, committing over \$25 million to specific health care programs, community-based and psychosocial support services, cancer research, development of new treatments, and improvement of direct patient services.

*Mercy Hospital*, Chicago's first teaching hospital, has been caring for Chicago for more than 157 years. Home to one of the Nation's leading Heart & Vascular Centers, Mercy Hospital was recently named one of the Nation's 100 Top Hospitals® for cardiovascular care by Thompson Healthcare and designated a Blue Distinction Center for Cardiac Care® by Blue Cross and Blue Shield. Also home to a certified Stroke Center, new Cancer Center, Comprehensive Breast & Women's Health Care Center, and a state-of-the-art Emergency Center that includes the Higginbottom Urgent Care for Kids Unit, Mercy provides a comprehensive approach to health care for the entire family.

*ITxM Cord Blood Services* is the not-for-profit umbilical cord blood donor bank serving Chicago area hospitals. It is the only bank of this kind in Illinois, and is located in Glenview, Illinois. The ITxM Cord Blood Bank accepts altruistic donations of cord blood after the birth of healthy babies. These donations are registered with the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP) to be made available to patients already in need of blood forming cells.

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