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[Back Sci Tech](#)

'We will break even in three years'

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Chennai, where a private cord blood bank is situated, will soon have a public cord blood bank. Dr. P. Srinivasan, Director of Jeevan Blood Bank, Chennai, intends to start a public cord blood bank to run on a not-for-profit basis. He discusses some challenges that a public cord blood bank would face and how he intends to overcome them



NOT A TOTALLY NEW TERRITORY: We already have background knowledge in many areas related to cord blood banking, says Dr. P. Srinivasan, Director of the Chennai based Jeevan Blood Bank. — Photo: R. Shivaji Rao

When do you intend to start the public cord blood bank?

I guess it will be within the next six months.

What will be the initial storage capacity of the bank?

It would be 1,000 units to start with.

One of the main concerns is the uneconomical nature of public cord blood banks. What do you have to say?

It is something similar to what we faced when we started Jeevan Blood Bank with cent per

component separation facility ten years ago. Convincing people and sensitising them on the merits of component therapy took ten years. If you extrapolate this two scenarios will come up. In the case of Reliance Life Sciences, I think it was started much ahead of its time, even before the medical profession knew of stem cell therapy. That may be one of the reasons why the use of stem cells was not high.

How do you see a public cord blood bank being started now?

You will still have a problem. It took us nearly eight years at Jeevan Blood Bank to achieve breakeven. Yes, it will be difficult till we get sufficient cord blood samples and demand becomes high.

Do you see any difference in public perception in the last few years?

Now awareness is high and demand for stem cells is growing. We are seeing an increasing demand for stem cells both from doctors and patients as they feel stem cells offer a magical cure. But appropriate and evidence based use of stem cells in carefully chosen candidates will decide the successful outcome of stem cell therapy.

What else is required for the success of a public bank?

Any not-for-profit programme will need a continuous support from all the stake holders — the organisation that runs the programme, doctors, parents willing to donate cord blood, recipients and finally, the media.

But public cord blood banks world over have been facing problems. What is your view?

The public cord blood banks run in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok have been successful programmes. What is essential is the need for these banks to be attached or be a part of blood transfusion service.

Blood banks and cord blood banks share a lot in common in terms of functions — collection, testing, processing, storage, compatibility testing and delivery.

How will you benefit by making the cord blood bank a part of Jeevan Blood Bank?

About 60-70 per cent of the infrastructure will be shared by doing so. The method of collection differs slightly and we already store blood plasma at -80 degrees centigrade. Cord blood requires -173 degrees centigrade.

We already have the background knowledge of storing at below zero degree temperature. We also need to learn about compatibility testing. We already have background knowledge in many areas.

The investment required for setting up and running a cord blood bank would be high. How do you intend to tackle this?

There are two things here. Donation from well-wishers and philanthropists would take care of the initial investment to start the cord blood bank. The operating cost will be met through a revenue model to help sustain the project on its own.

In the initial stages when the turnover is low (donations and off-take from the bank), we must

depend on donations.

How long do you think it would take you to break even?

We are looking at breaking even by the third year of operations.

What, in your opinion, is the advantage gained by starting the bank now?

There is awareness created among the public by the private cord blood banks. We should give credit to those people. And public cord blood banks would like to capitalise on that awareness created and take it forward.

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