

QLD News

Cord blood trial offers hope of a better life for cerebral palsy sufferer

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Janelle MilesThe Sunday Mail (Qld)



Rayna Gammie with son Jalen, who suffers from cerebral palsy, father Andrew, and sister Ariana, 22 months. Picture: Jono Searle

WHEN Ariana Gammie was born 22 months ago, her parents paid thousands of dollars to have her umbilical cord blood collected in the hope it would one day help her older brother, Jalen.

Six-year-old Jalen was diagnosed with severe cerebral palsy after experiencing complications before his birth. He cannot walk or stand and has trouble talking.

His mum, Rayna, was pregnant with Ariana when the children's dad, Andrew, read an article about the potential medical benefits of stem cells from cord blood, prompting the couple to have Ariana's collected when she was born.

The Queensland family hopes to be included in an Australian-first trial at Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, infusing the cord blood of siblings into children with cerebral palsy. Their participation in the trial hinges on the one in four chance that Ariana's cord blood is a full match for Jalen.

"Any improvement would be a massive help to our son's quality of life," Mrs Gammie said.

Lead researcher Dinah Reddihough said the two-year trial of 12 children, aged one to 11, would assess the safety of using cord blood in children with cerebral palsy.

If, as expected, the stem cells produce no severe side effects, larger studies will be launched to test whether they provide any benefit.

Professor Reddihough, of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, said she was not expecting "huge miracles". "But even slight improvements can make a huge difference," she said.

"Moving around that little bit better might enable someone to be able to do more self-care and perhaps get a job in the future."

Brisbane-based obstetrician Brad Robinson, of Greenslopes Obstetrics and Gynaecology, said one in 500 babies was born with "some degree of cerebral palsy". The condition affects an estimated 34,000 Australians.

Australian stem cell trials are considered vital to assess the value of the therapy as stories mount of families who have children with cerebral palsy paying tens of thousands of dollars for treatment overseas.



Stem cells from Ariana Gammie (left) could help brother Jalen gain a better quality of life. Picture: Jono Searle

Dr Robinson said parents could not be certain that what their children received in some overseas countries was even stem cells.

“You can’t be sure about the training of the medical staff working with you, and you can’t be sure about the screening of the blood products that you’re getting,” he said.

He joined calls for Australia to fund more research into stem cell therapies.

“The take-up rate for umbilical collection in Australia is of the order of less than 1 per cent of births,” Dr Robinson said.

“It’s just not good enough. For a relatively wealthy country, when you have an area of medicine that is so extraordinarily promising, we really need to be doing more. I think it’s absolutely the future of medicine.

“In 20 years’ time, I think people will look back on these days and think we were operating in the Dark Ages.”

Private cord blood storage company Cell Care has recently offered to collect and store the stem cells of babies who have a sibling with cerebral palsy at no cost.

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