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Stem-cell bankers seek to tap India

Market seen growing at 40% a year

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Stem-cell banking, which involves collection, processing, and storage of stem cells, is emerging as a hot destination for investments.

Stem cells are master cells of the body that have the potential to develop into specialised cell types. They are being researched for use in the treatment of cancer, diabetes, heart ailments, liver diseases, multiple sclerosis, etc.

Stem-cell banking involves extracting stem cells from the umbilical cord and umbilical cord blood of babies and storing it for future use of the baby or close relatives. Its market in India is touted to be about ₹100 crore, and is growing at over 40% per year.

Steven Fang, group CEO, CordLife, an international stem cell banking firm, sees India as the market where stem-cell banking would see sustained growth in the coming years. Rising disposable incomes and increased awareness will drive the growth, he said.

Aasim Ghazi, head, (marketing), Cryobanks India, a stem cell banking company, said less than 0.5% of the approximately 26 million births in India annually become a part of stem-cell banking, said. "This shows that the scope for growth is tremendous."

CordLife plans to invest A$4 million (₹17 crore) in India over the next two years to grow its business, which, according to Fang, has been growing at 350% year on year.

"We would be expanding to Pune, Baroda, Ahmedabad, in addition to our presence in Mumbai, Kolkata etc. There is a lot of interest in the medical community in India towards storage of stem cells — more than in China or Indonesia," Fang said.

Mayur Abhaya, executive director with Chennai-based LifeCell International, said the company is looking to invest ₹10-12 crore over the next 24 months in clinical trials for use of stem cells for cerebral palsy and juvenile diabetes patients. LifeCell is also looking to set up a bank for menstrual blood (a rich source of stem cells). "We have seen 40-50% year on year growth," Abhaya said.

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