

## **Law Will Expand Availability of Umbilical Cord Blood for Treatments**

BY Liz Townsend

The use of umbilical cord blood stem cells to treat and cure many diseases will be enhanced by the Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act, passed by Congress after a seven-month delay and signed by President George W. Bush December 20.

“Not only has God in His infinite wisdom and goodness created the placenta and umbilical cord to nurture and protect the precious life of an unborn child,” said bill sponsor Rep. Christopher Smith (R-N.J.), “but now we know that another gift awaits us immediately after birth, something very special left behind—cord blood that is rich with stem cells.”

The act will provide \$79 million to obtain 150,000 more units of cord blood, which is expected to help treat up to 90% of patients who need the versatile cells. The blood is derived directly from placentas and umbilical cords donated by parents after their babies’ birth, without harming the donor.

Cord blood stem cells have been used to treat thousands of patients suffering from more than 60 different diseases, including leukemia, Hodgkin’s Disease, sickle cell disease, and thalassemia. Researchers also theorize that they may have the capacity to differentiate into other cell types, making them useful in the exploration of ethical stem cell therapies for even more diseases.

In addition, cord blood collection will be combined with the National Bone Marrow Donor Registry to create the C.W. Bill Young Cell Transplantation Program, which will serve as a single-access point for doctors and patients to find appropriate matches for treatment. The act also seeks to increase public awareness of donation, to collect units from different ethnic groups that will match more patients.

“We have been working on this bill since 2001, and I am thankful that treatments will now, finally, be made available to patients in need,” said Rep. Smith. “Thousands of Americans who might have otherwise continued to suffer or died will now be saved because larger and diverse inventories of umbilical cord stem cells will be available.”

Passed by the House May 24 on an overwhelming vote of 431–1, the bill was held up in the Senate by embryonic stem cell proponents who wanted to force a vote on their bill authorizing destructive research on human embryos. When promised that their bill will be considered early in 2006, the umbilical cord blood measure was brought to the Senate floor December 16 and passed the Senate by unanimous consent.

Cord blood programs across the country praised the bill, saying that it will allow them help many more people. “We are so happy that soon we will be able to ensure that no patient in need should have to go without a transplant,” said Dr. Pablo Rubinstein, director of New York Blood Center’s National Cord Blood Program, in a press release. “Cord blood stem cells are a real option for children and adults; by the passing of this legislation, we will now be closer to fulfilling that goal and giving all patients a fair chance.”

Pro-lifers also applauded the act as well as the timing of President Bush’s signing ceremony, just five days before Christmas. “As Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, how appropriate that we can also celebrate the medical miracles made possible by cord blood retrieved immediately after live births,” said Richard Doerflinger, deputy director of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. “Congress and the President have given a wonderful Christmas present to patients in need.”