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StemLife eschews research with embryonic blood

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Stem-cell research in Malaysia only uses non-controversial methods, and it is not done at the expense of sacrificing embryos.

"The only controversial method of deriving cord blood is from embryonic blood, a method that we absolutely do not use," StemLife Sdn Bhd corporate development manager Edwin Cheah said.

He said StemLife uses the three non-controversial methods: deriving them from the umbilical cord, peripheral blood and bone marrow.

The fourth method is to harvest cells from embryos left over from fertility treatments, which are otherwise discarded. The cells are then grown and could potentially repair damaged organs and cure neurological illnesses.

The harvesting of embryonic stem cells is highly controversial as it requires the destruction of fertilised eggs that could grow into humans.

Cheah said sourcing stem cells through the three methods practised in Malaysia was safe.

"We do not play God. We are not controversial in any way. We treat the methods used to source stem cells as life-saving procedures," he said.

StemLife is among the representatives at the BioMalaysia 2002 International Biotechnology Symposium, Exhibition and Business Partnering forum.

StemLife focuses on stem cell medicine and is the first biomedical initiative to be located in Cyberjaya and awarded the Multimedia Super Corridor status.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that without ethics, any research in the study of stem cell would be damaging and the Government would not go to the extent of playing God.

Stem cells are unique cells in the body which have the capacity to form into other specialised cells.

Although most cells are committed to conducting a specific function, a stem cell remains uncommitted until it receives a signal from the body to develop into a specialised cell.

The focus of StemLife is to derive stem cells from the umbilical cord and store them in the event the patient (baby) developed a disease which needed a stem cell transplant.

Cheah said stem cell transplants are effective in treating leukaemia and lymphoma, thalassemia, metabolic disorders, immunodeficiency ailments and