M'sia has only cord blood bank in the world for Malays

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia is the first and only place in the world to have a cord blood bank for the Malay race, said Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng.

"The minority race in the world like the Malays has no cord blood bank in the world that can supply them with cord blood, except this country," said Chua after the official opening of the National Blood Centre yesterday by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, the wife of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He said the other races like the Chinese could rely on cord blood banks in other countries such as Singapore and Taiwan, but the Malays had only one place to go – Malaysia.

Since the discovery of cord blood taken from umbilical cords, which is the richest source of cord blood, the harvesting of stem cells has made transplants possible for patients.

With such a bank, those suffering from leukaemia, sickle cell anaemia and thalassaemia need not depend on siblings or relatives with matching cord blood, or seek treatment overseas which can be tedious or an expensive process.

Chua said that although the cord blood service was introduced last year, the National Blood Centre was able to collect only 550 units.

"It is because we need to set very stringent standards," he said.

"For example, the sample or placenta collected needs to give us at least two million stem cells. If it is less than that, it cannot be used and if the blood is tainted with diseases, the stem cells also cannot be used."

The supply will progressively build up to 5,000 units in five years.

The ministry has spent RM1.3mil to buy special equipment to freeze and keep the cord blood for up to 10 years.