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Stem cell advances

CANCER patients and people with genetic disorders could be helped by a breakthrough by Australian researchers who have grown new human stem cells outside the body.

The finding has the potential to cut the number of painful bone-marrow harvests needed for transplantation and increase the number of people able to use rare donations of blood taken from umbilical cords.

Stem cell transplants are vital in the treatment of cancer patients who have had their bone marrow destroyed by chemotherapy. But their use is hindered by the difficulty of collecting sufficient amounts of cells, said John Rasko, who is the head of gene and stem cell therapy at the Centenary Institute.

The cells are taken from bone marrow or cord blood and transfused into patients to help rebuild the area destroyed by chemotherapy, and strengthen their immune response.

The team is seeking to trial the technique in humans, and estimates it will take five to 10 years before the method could be used to treat cancer patients.

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