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Thalassemia patients given a better chance  
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To offer people better health care, the Thailand Centre of Excellence for Life Science (Tcels) has teamed up with the Thai Red Cross to develop stem-cell therapy and personalised medicine to treat thalassemia patients.

The development is still in its early stages but it could be complete in three years.

Stem-cell therapy involves obtaining processed tissue from animal embryos, fetuses, or organs that are injected into a patient.

The products obtained from specific organs or tissues correspond with the unhealthy organs or tissues of the recipient and automatically carry the healthy cells to the target organs to regenerate them.

Tcels' chief executive officer Thongchai Thavichachart said the new method would treat thalassemia patients more efficiently.

Instead of making blood transfers, the new stem-cell therapy will inject cord blood stem cells in to the patient's bone marrow, replacing the old damaged ones, and this in turn will help the patient's body regenerate and produce blood for itself.

It's estimated that patients would have an 80-per-cent chance of recovery with the stem-cell method.

To support the new medical treatment, Thongchai said Tcels has set up a cord blood stem-cell bank at the Thai Red Cross; around 300 samples are stored in the bank.

It also plans to increase the number of cell samples to 5,000 by next year and eventually 20,000 samples in the future.

"Having more stem-cell samples will help doctors offer the treatment to more patients as they have choices to match individual immune systems," he said. He added that the centre has also asked the government for Bt200 million as a fund to support the stem-cell project.

The budget will be used to develop the stem-cell bank as well as improve the marrow transplant rooms at Ramathibodi Hospital, Siriraj Hospital, Chulalongkorn Hospital, and Phramongkutkloa Hospital, to match international standards. Meanwhile, the centre is busy promoting the development of what they call "personalised medicine".

Here a patient's gene-composition information is closely studied to predict the disease that he or she maybe prone to.

This method will provide appropriate medication and customised therapy.

Thongchai said the centre recently set up the country's first genomics centre which will be involved in developing a clinical and genetic patient database. The data can be used to define the general population.

This information, he said, would allow doctors to get gene composition information and make an analysis so they could provide appropriate medication for each individual.

"So the problem that arises while prescribing the wrong drug will be eliminated as the new method will reduce human error, making healthcare management more proactive and predictive," he said.

The database, he added, would also benefit local medical researchers in developing new drugs as the information can help shorten the time involved while designing drugs suited for specific genetic requirements.

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