



Stepping forward

A child who could not walk found hope through his own cord blood. NOOR AZURA AHMAD has the story.

In a gated community in the Bangkok suburbs, a three-year-old boy gets up from his mat and walks towards a white board on the wall. He doodles on it with an orange marker pen before returning to the mat. "We are very happy," said Sumalee Thamsombatdee, 35, the boy's mother. "Just a few days ago, we had to coax Pole to walk, and he couldn't walk more than 10 steps before he stopped," she adds, smiling.

BABY OF THEIR DREAMS At the interview, Pole was tottering all over the place with an irresistible grin on his cute face. He delighted in his toy telephone, drew on the whiteboard and joined his sisters who were colouring their books. It's hard to believe that less than a month before, the young boy couldn't care less about walking and poking around.

Pole Kitikorn was born in October 2006. Conceived through IVF (In-Vitro Fertilisation), the news of his impending arrival was greeted with pleasure. "We already had two daughters and wanted a son to complete the family. We were very happy when we found out that he was on the way," Sumalee reminisced. Delivered via planned caesarean section, he was perfect in every way.

Despite his cuteness and endearing ways, Sumalee couldn't help feeling concerned when he didn't sit up after seven months. "If you ask the doctors, they will tell you not to worry because some children develop slower than others. But after one year, he still wasn't sitting up by himself. It was quite obvious that something wasn't right with my baby," said Sumalee. "He is such a delightful child, and we didn't want his inability to walk to hold him back."

In the beginning, no one could determine the reason for his problem. It took the doctors eight months before they could conclusively say the problem was caused by cerebral palsy. The delay in diagnosis was because first, the doctors had to check his spine, bones, and conduct various tests to rule out the other possible reasons their boy could not walk. Cerebral palsy cases differ greatly from one case to the other and there is no simple test to determine the problem.

A COMMON CONDITION Cerebral palsy is the cause for the range of disabilities affecting spastic children. Effects of cerebral palsy range from minimal to extreme. Some children affected with cerebral palsy look perfectly

normal except for the occasional clumsiness while 20 per cent are mentally hampered by the condition. Most patients are normal despite their impaired ability to control their expressions and reactions, which leads people to believe that they lack intelligence. In truth, some are exceptionally intelligent.

Dr Konstantinos Papadopoulos, or Dr Kostas for short, Chief Operating Officer of StemLife Thailand explains, "Cerebral palsy is a condition stemming from the patients' brain which fails to develop fully just before or after a child is born. It tends to occur more frequently if there was a problem during birth. While lack of oxygen and infections are believed to be a factor, in many cases no one knows why it happens. It causes disruption in motor skills, visible as spasticity, paralysis or seizures. It's more common than we think, afflicting one out of 500 babies born and one in three preterm babies. It only causes mental problems in 20 per cent of the cases and this usually occurs only in very premature babies."

In Pole's case, he appears as normal as any other three-year-old, except for the weakness in his legs. His condition is also referred to as being spastic diplegic. According to the doctors, there is no cure and the only hope for him is to put him through physiotherapy sessions to prevent the muscles from deteriorating. Following this advice, he was taken for physical therapy at the hospital twice a week and coached him at home daily. Despite all this, he hardly improved and only managed to walk 10 steps at a time with the aid of corrective shoes.

Lucky for them, they run their own family business, so Sumalee can work flexible hours in between caring for the baby and taking him to the hospital for physical therapy. The couple have also created space for Pole in the office so that Sumalee can spend time playing with him and coaching him to walk. "She really works two hours a day," her husband Kitikorn laughingly admits. At home, Sumalee's in-laws are around and they have a helper who can take care of the girls after school. They do make an extra effort to spend time with the girls although they understand that their brother needs a lot of their parent's attention.

SAVING FOR THE FUTURE To prepare themselves, Sumalee and Kitikorn asked doctors and learnt what they could about cerebral palsy on the internet. As they searched for something that could help their son get better, the couple came across a new technique that had brought

positive results to another boy in Bangkok. The boy had a similar condition to Pole. After 18 months, he was already walking, swimming and trying to run. They didn't know much, but one thing they did know was that the child's parents had saved his cord blood at birth.

Storing blood from babies' umbilical cords is a practice that is gaining popularity among parents where the facility is available. An amount of cord blood is collected at birth, processed and stored in stem cell banks where they can be stored indefinitely. Cord blood is rich in stem cells, cells that help babies develop in the womb. "Stem cell technology can help in a number of ailments from thalassemia, heart disease to diabetic ulcers," explained Dr Kostas.

"Lucky for us, we had stored Pole's cord blood at birth," said the father. "It was my sister who recommended it to us. She had banked in her son's cord blood and suggested we do the same for ours." "We didn't really know what the benefits were, but at RM13,500 for processing and lifetime storage, the price was reasonable. We figured that it might come in handy in case anything happened to Pole in the future. We didn't know that we would need it after less than three years," Sumalee chipped in.

The couple consulted specialists from the cord blood bank about the other boy. They also got in touch with the family of that child and asked them questions about their son's improvement. When the Kitikorns were confident that the technique is safe, they decided to go ahead with the infusion. They know that the application is still at the experimental stage, but more than a hundred cases have been recorded and many have shown clear improvement in their condition.

The whole process took 10 days because Pole needed some injections beforehand. The application itself only took 10 minutes. 30 ml of cord blood, about two tablespoonfuls, was sent into Pole's veins through a drip. "After some initial discomfort as the needle was inserted, Pole carried on watching TV and laughing at the cartoons. His doctor kept him in ICU for observation for a day. He had some itching that night but it cleared by morning," Sumalee related.

"This use for cord blood was started in the United States and has now spread to Europe and Asia. At the moment, the application is still at the trial stage and no reports have been written about the practice. However, children who were infused with their own cord blood got on their feet more quickly than those who only had regular physiotherapy which sometimes take as long as eight to nine years before showing clear improvement," said Dr Kostas.



Clockwise from top: Sumalee, Kitikorn, Pole and his two sisters; Pole experiencing standing on his own two feet with Dr. Kostas; the courageous Pole receiving treatment.

WALKING AWAY! "The results we saw after a week are very encouraging," said Pole's mom. "He used to be listless and didn't like to walk. After the infusion, he looked more alert and interested in his surroundings. He speaks clearly now."

With an arm around her son to keep him steady, Sumalee pointed to his feet, "See how normal the angle of his feet is now? He doesn't even need corrective shoes anymore. His left leg used to be a problem but not any more. His legs are not that strong yet, but we'll be happy if he can improve enough to walk by himself and go to school like other kids."

Dr Kostas assured her that he most probably will achieve that. "I know he may not be 100 per cent cured, but I hope that it will be enough to help him a normal, productive life," concluded Sumalee. 