

(AFP) Agence France Presse

With its doctors at the vanguard of pioneering stem cell therapy, South Korea is looking to become a "medical tourism" destination for foreigners unable to find cures in their own countries.

Two foreigners have already received therapy at South Korean medical firm Histostem, which has perfected a method of stem cell therapy using umbilical cord blood and boasts the biggest stock of cord blood and stem cells in the world.

Although some Western doctors are sceptical over the proven benefits of the treatment, the firm is hoping to build a hospital in South Korea's tourist island of Jeju, off the country's southern coast, in the next few years.

Jeju is currently considering introducing legislation that will offer incentives to firms moving to the island, and the timing of Histostem's project to build a hospital will depend on when the laws are enacted.

"The hospital is part of a medical tourism project, but we need to see all the necessary legal provisions squarely in place before we push through with the project in concrete details," the firm's chief financial officer Kye Yung-Su told AFP.

Histostem has bought a large plot of land and is hoping to complete construction by 2007.

"But it could be delayed by a few years from our original target date," said Kye.

Han Hoon, the doctor who heads Histostem, said the hospital would be the first in the world offering only stem-cell therapy.

Stem cells refer to master cells found in embryos and other areas of the body that can develop into cells of any organ. They could have a valuable therapeutic use in treating illnesses from cancer to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, according to experts.

Since May 2003, Han and his team have been using umbilical cord blood stem-cell therapy to treat patients with medical conditions that other treatments have failed to help such as liver cirrhosis, Buerger's disease, diabetes, chronic renal failure and a dozen other diseases.

Last year Han's team treated its first foreign patients, a 21-year-old Croatian man and a 32-year-old Turkish woman both suffering from spinal cord injuries.

The team's first patient from the United States is expected to arrive before the end of the year.

Michelle Farrar, 36, from Virginia, was paralyzed in a car accident two years ago. She is paying around 100,000 dollars for the treatment without a guarantee of success.

Han said that the Croatian and the Turk had both partially recovered their sense of hot and cold but have not yet recovered the ability to move and need a second course of stem cell injections.

He said that results of stem cell therapy vary depending on the kind of diseases and the degree of severity in each case. But in most cases treatments improved or cured the diseases, Han claimed.

He and his researchers have carried out more than 250 umbilical cord blood stem cell treatments since July 2003, including cases of spinal cord injuries, Han has recently added Alzheimer's Disease to his list for treatments and is excited about the potential. He has treated two Alzheimer patients in the past six months and the results were "quite impressive," he said.

A 79-year-old woman who received two injections of stem cells 16 days earlier has been making progress, her son Back Jae-Seoung told AFP.

"Before the injections, she didn't even recognize me and just stared blankly at TV," he said. "Now she keeps up her own running commentary on TV drama and knows who I am," said the 55-year-old

businessman.

However, critics say that although Han's therapy is based on genuine science and may have potential, its benefits remain unproven.

"Medical tests must be backed by scientific papers submitted to authoritative journals for experts' scrutiny. If you just say 'Hey, I tried this and it worked well', you would become a laughing stock," said Kong Il-Keun, a bio engineering expert of the Suncheon National University.

Meanwhile controversy over South Korea's stem cell industry heated up this week with the nation's cloning pioneer Hwang Woo-Suk -- who is not involved with Han or Histostem -- admitted ethical irregularities.

Hwang admitted Thursday that he had covered up the fact that researchers in his team had donated their own eggs to research that produced the world's first cloned human embryo for generating stems cells.

Taking responsibility for ethical violations, he stepped down from all official posts including the chairmanship of a new research body, the World Stem Cell Hub, established only last month by the government. Experts, however, said the setback would not derail the nation's pioneering stem cell research.

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