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Placentas save injured eyes

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For some expectant Tallahassee moms, experiencing the miracle of birth means delivering the gift of eyesight.

Last month, Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare hosted a gathering at the Women's Pavilion to recognize those mothers. Invitations were sent to all the women who had participated in TMH's innovative program to use donated placental tissue to save damaged and diseased eyes.

TMH is one of only two hospitals in the country that has been asking local mothers who deliver by elective Caesarean section if they want to donate their placentas.

According to Vikki McKinnie, an obstetrician/gynecologist with North Florida Women's Care, local women have answered with a resounding "yes."

"(The placenta) is something that otherwise would (be) discarded and be of no use," she said, "and these women, on one of the most important days of their lives . . . are actually performing a selfless act at the same time."

Donor Melissa Boldt, who gave birth to son Will 17 months ago, was at the April gathering at TMH. She said that when she was approached about donating her placenta

and realized how many people it could help, it was hard to say no.

Boldt said she never really thought about what happens to the placenta after the baby is born.

"It's one of those things you don't really think about," she said.

Retiree Lucy Fox was also at the Women's Pavilion event. She's glad that women such as Boldt have donated their placentas. Donated tissue was used to repair Fox's eyes in 2006.

Fox first suspected she had a problem with her eyes while watching television.

"I noticed that people's faces became more blank," she said.

After going to the eye doctor, she was told that she had pterygia, an abnormal fleshy growth over the eyeball. The condition could have eventually blinded her.

After the surgery, which was covered by her insurance, Fox said, she now sees light and colors more brightly.

Fox's gratitude extends to TMH, which was selected for the placental donation program because of its relationships with North Florida Women's Care and the Southeast Tissue Alliance.

Kathy Zorn of SETA said her organization, which coordinates organ and tissue donations for both donors and recipients, agreed to try out the placenta collection program with women who were living in or coming to Tallahassee to have their babies by elective C-section.

The response was tremendous. Since the program started, hundreds of women have donated their placentas.

Donor mothers are screened before delivery, and the membranes are processed according to regulations established by the Food and Drug Administration.

The placental tissue, which is sterilized and preserved, can be used to treat certain eye conditions. The amniotic membrane, or innermost lining of the placenta, is similar to the eye's surface and contains natural growth factors.

Zorn said that the healing qualities of placental tissue have long been well-known, but it

was Dr. Scheffer C.G. Tseng who found a way to protect the viability of the tissue after.

The eyeball is slow to heal after injury or surgery, said Zorn, because of its near-constant movement and because of the lack of blood vessels covering the area. In using placental tissue to aid in healing, the cryo-preserved amniotic membrane is cut into small sections, which doctors use as patches placed directly onto the eye.

Ophthalmologist Jerry Ford, who performed Fox's eye surgery, said placental tissue is usually used to help treat diseases such as eye cancer, or to heal wounds caused by trauma.

"This is used mainly to speed up healing and prevent scarring," he said. "It helps the surface heal a lot quicker."

Ford, who estimates he does one or two transplants a year, said problems can occur after surgery, such as the eyelid adhering to the eye globe. The placental tissue helps prevent that.

Since Tseng's initial discovery, even more advances have been made. Before, the sliver of tissue had to be glued to the eye or sutured in place, but Zorn said the membrane can now be placed into a contact lens-like ring.

"Now they can just drop it in," she said.

FIND OUT MORE

www.tmh.org/womenPavilion.cfm - Tallahassee Memorial Hospital's Women's Pavilion

www.osref.org - The Ocular Surface Research & Education Foundation

www.biotissue.com - Bio-Tissue