Stem cell therapy sparks hope in ailing hearts

REUTERS, *Bangkok*

Esteban Bonilla feels no trepidation as he is wheeled into the operating room of a Bangkok hospital, despite the fact he is only minutes away from starting an experimental stem cell procedure he hopes will keep him alive.

"I really don't feel nervous at all," said the 37-year-old scuba instructor from Florida, who discovered his heart was failing at 32. "For the last five years, I've been waiting to die. This is the first time I've been hopeful to live."

The source of Bonilla's newfound hope is a novel therapy that involves injecting stem cells culled from the patient's own blood into the heart to try to regenerate ailing heart muscle.

The two-hour procedure, which involves a patient's own adult stem cells, skirts the risk of rejection by the body and thorny ethical issues surrounding the use of embryonic stem cells posed by some who equate using embryos with destroying human life.

"We have not lost a single patient," said Suphachai Chaithiraphan, chairman of Chao Phya Hospital and president of the Heart Association of Thailand. "If you can offer help to desperate people, then I think you should."

The destination for many of the heart patients seeking stem cell therapy is Thailand, where doctors have staked their reputations on a procedure they say could save thousands of people but has yet to be approved in the United States.

"With stem cell therapy, people who have not had access to heart transplants or resources to go to the hospital on a regular basis can be helped," said Kitipan V Arom, chief cardio-thoracic surgeon at Bangkok Heart Hospital.

Kitipan, who has performed the procedure on 27 patients since May, including Bonilla, estimates up to 500,000 Americans a year suffer from heart failure, which leaves them winded after performing routine activities such as climbing stairs.

But the use of stem cells -- master cells in the body which can develop into any cell type -- remains a touchy subject for many since very early human embryos are considered the most promising for treating human diseases.

South Korean stem cell scientist Hwang Woo-Suk, who published a landmark study on tailored human stem cells in May, resigned from his post at Seoul National University on December 23 after a probe panel said results in his paper had been fabricated.

BODY BUILDING BLOCKS

Some scientists fret the controversy over Hwang's case could provide fodder for opponents of embryonic stem cell research, which is seen as a vital step toward treatment of a host of ailments such as spinal injuries.

Their concerns cast some scepticism over the advocates of adult stem cell use due to fears the research may be politicised.

Kitipan said the long-term effects of the stem cell procedure were uncertain, and the possibility remained that patients who have had the surgery must go under the knife again.

"The problem is only a small number of patients are being done so far," he said.

London bomber left 121,000 pounds in will

AFP, *London*

One of the four suspected extremists involved in the July 7, 2005 suicide bomb attacks in London left 121,000 pounds (175,455 euros, 212,433 dollars) in a will, The Sun reported yesterday.

Shehzad Tanweer, who worked part-time in a fish and chip shop in his home city of Leeds, northern England, blew himself up at Aldgate Underground station, killing eight people and injuring dozens more.

In all, 52 commuters died in the terrorist attacks on three Underground trains and a double-decker bus while more than 700 people were injured.

An official from the High Court probate department was quoted by the newspaper as saying that 22-year-old Tanweer's estate was a net figure following the deduction of loans, debts and funeral costs.

PHOTO: STAR

Projanmer Chetana forms a human chain at Muktangan in the city yesterday demanding a ban on religion-based politics.

Cinnamon can help relieve diabetes

AFP, *Kuala Lumpur*

Malaysian researchers have found new proof that cinnamon can relieve diabetes by lowering sugar levels.

A three-year study carried out by the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia showed that the spice has positive effects on Type II diabetes, the kind which typically develops during adulthood, the Star newspaper said.

Research chief Mohammad Roji said herbalists all over the world used cinnamon to treat diarrhoea and arthritis because of its ability to improve circulation, heal wounds and prevent ulcers and allergies.

"In the last decade, laboratory studies have also revealed that cinnamon extract mimicked insulin action in the cells," he said, according to the daily.

Insulin regulates the body's ability to use sugars in the blood, but in people with diabetes the cells lose their ability to respond to the hormone.