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Taking stem cell to masses - <I>Dr Chandra Viswanathan</I>

06 February 2013 | Features | By BioSpectrum Bureau

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By being able to progress in the highly cutting-edge field of stem cell research and clinical pathology, Dr Viswanathan has grown with each success and now heads the Regenerative Medicine group at one of the country' s leading biotech firms, Reliance Life Sciences (RLS).

Dr Viswanathan has an illustrious list of credentials. After acquiring MD in pathology, she chose to successfully pursue doctorate in applied biology from the Mumbai University. Out of sheer interest in pathology, she pursued a diploma in pathology and bacteriology, as well as a diploma in transfusion medicine from the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Mumbai. Around the same time (1983), she was awarded the "Salaskar Memorial Award" for securing the highest marks in pathology and microbiology.

Dr Viswanathan is acclaimed to have set up the country's first blood component laboratory, while she was leading the operations at National Plasma Fractionation Center at the Mumbai Municipal Corporation hospital as its director. The fractionation center was set up to provide affordable blood products to patients, and while heading its operations, Dr Viswanathan managed a multitude of tasks at the same time. She says, "During that time in 1986, there was no precedence to be followed. I was treading an un-trodden path, but every challenge was a new excitement for me. Right from setting-up the blood bank, component laboratories, laying down quality systems, developing and marketing blood products in the market, developing SOPs, improving voluntary donor base, it was entirely on-the-job learning experience for me."

In 2002, Dr Viswanathan initiated, what would now be her decade long journey at RLS. Initially as a medical director, she initiated the cord blood banking initiative, wherein she made ample use of the wide experience in pathology to help set up the first plasma fractionation plant at Reliance. This uniquely built facility today services more than 50 percent of the blood product requirement of the country and RLS can now boast of being the only "blood refinery" whose products are being used by physicians and surgeons across several countries in the world. Dr Viswanathan has also been handling the administrative aspect of the proceedings by being closely involved with most of the blood banks in the country to source plasma for the fractionation plant.

In recent times, she has been exploring the next frontier of stem cells to address unmet medical needs in the Indian patient population. The Regenerative Medicine group is currently researching various avenues for the use of autologus and allogenic transplant of stem cells for the treatment of clinical disorders. The department has introduced a variety of products that are aimed at addressing specific needs in the areas of ophthalmology, cardiac disorders and more.

Apart from being felicitated with a number of awards, Dr Viswanathan has published over 60 full text publications in academic journals and has as been an invited speaker at several national and international meetings and symposia, in the area of blood banking, stem cell banking, and plasma fractionation. About her success and future endeavors, she sums it up by saying, "Success has become my habit and I have been extremely lucky so far in being successful in any new venture that I have undertaken."