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Need to test blood? Ask first

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

Most parents will agree to having their newborns' blood studied if they're asked for permission, according to a University of Michigan study released Wednesday.

The issue of parental consent has emerged as a national concern, pitting privacy advocates against health researchers.

Authors of the study, published in the online journal Public Health Genomics, found consent is key to collecting blood that is studied to foster better understanding of diseases.

Three of four parents said they would be very or somewhat willing to permit future research on blood that is initially taken from newborns' heels in order to screen for genetic disorders.

Even privacy advocates agree.

"Parents are not against research. They want to be involved in the process," said Beth A. Tarini, a University of Michigan assistant professor of pediatrics and lead author of the study.

The national study comes as state officials work to become a national biotech research center by setting up a neonatal biobank in Detroit with 4 million blood spots collected since 1984.

The National Institutes of Health also is funding a \$13.5 million project to create a national newborn blood repository.

Similar efforts in Minnesota and Texas have been stymied by lawsuits from parents objecting to the use of their child's DNA for research.

Parents in the Minnesota lawsuit said they might feel differently if their permission had been sought.

"That's the right way to handle it," said Wade Halvorson, 44, of Lester Prairie, near Minneapolis.

More than 4 million newborns nationally, including 120,000 in Michigan, are screened every year for disorders. Many states have saved the blood spots, creating historical population data that researchers can use to study environmental exposures before birth, genetic predisposition to diseases and other issues.

Michigan is working on a consent form to ask new parents if the blood collected from their baby can also be used for future disease research. To opt out, forms are available online at: <http://bit.ly/aMnxE>.

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