

RN snags dream job that didn't exist a year ago

TIFFANY LAWLESS HELPS GIVE A LIFELINE TO CRITICALLY ILL PATIENTS BY COLLECTING UMBILICAL CORD BLOOD.

SHORTLY AFTER GIVING BIRTH, TIFFANY Lawless found her perfect match.

She landed a one-in-a-million job helping to match new moms with patients who need life-saving umbilical cord blood transplants.

It was 2011, and Canada's provincial and territorial health ministers had just committed \$48 million to create a national, public bank for umbilical cord blood. The idea was to collect and store cord blood voluntarily donated by mothers, making it easier for those needing transplants to find matches. Canadian Blood Services was opening the country's first collection site in Lawless' hometown, Ottawa, and needed a collections supervisor.

Lawless, 33, was on maternity leave with her second child when she stumbled on the job posting. With her experience in both health promotion and labour and delivery, the job seemed promising.

"This was exactly what I'd been working for. It took (all) my job experience and combined it into one perfectly suited role," Lawless says.

It was a dream job Lawless could never have dreamt of, because it didn't exist in Canada before that point. Private cord blood storage had been happening in the country for years, and Héma-Quebec has operated a provincial bank since 2004, but there was never a national, publicly funded bank to collect and store blood.

"I remember moms would ask me if they could donate it to

someone who needs it, but we never had a system in place," Lawless says of her time in labour and delivery.

Stem cells collected from the umbilical cord and placenta have the potential to treat leukemia, lymphoma and other life-threatening conditions. Prior to the

transplants, and Lawless says that number is growing at a staggering rate.

There are still misconceptions about the bank, she admits, with many confusing cord blood stem cells with embryonic stem cells. Cord blood stem cells – or hematopoietic stem cells – are

Lawless knew early on she wanted to help save lives for a living, and she gravitated toward maternal and newborn health. She graduated from the University of Ottawa and began working in labour and delivery at Ottawa's Queensway Carleton Hospital.

"Generally, when moms come in to have babies, it's a happy event," she says. "It's special being a part of something so memorable."

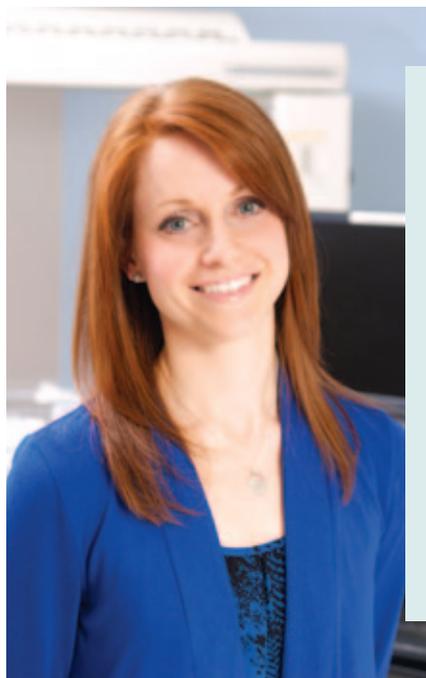
After five years, she craved a change and moved to a health promotion role at the Ottawa Heart Institute, where she thrived while implementing new smoking cessation initiatives. It was that same desire for something new that made the cord blood bank so appealing.

"That's the great thing about nursing. There are always changes in health care and new things coming up," she notes.

In her current role, Lawless liaises with expectant mothers, doctors and midwives to share information about the benefits of cord blood donation. It may be unique, but it's not a far cry from where she started – she still spends much of her time in labour and delivery units.

"If I had a crystal ball...I would say this is absolutely the perfect job for me," Lawless says. "At the end of the day, we're helping to save lives and that's the important thing." **RN**

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Three things you don't know about Tiffany Lawless:

1. She achieved a level eight in piano with The Royal Conservatory of Music.
2. She enjoys kickboxing and has recently learned to golf.
3. She loves to bake, especially personalized birthday cakes for her kids.

official opening of the Ottawa location in September 2013, Canada was the only G7 country without a national public cord blood bank. Yet Canada's diverse population translates to a high demand for stem cells and often long waits for a match, since patients have the best chance of matching with donors from the same ethnic background. About 1,000 Canadians currently sit on the wait list for stem cell

collected after the birth of a baby without interfering with the natural birthing process. The risk to the baby and mother is therefore low.

Umbilical cords and placentas are mostly discarded as waste after delivery, and Lawless says the bank's biggest competitor is often the trash. That's where she comes in, to raise awareness about their life-saving potential.