

Hybrid configurations of umbilical cord blood banking in Europe

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Biobanks are crucial technologies in modern biomedicine, since they make available samples and bioinformation to researcher and clinicians. There are several biobanking models, differently organized, inspired by opposing ethics and varyingly involved in the economic exploitation of the surplus value extracted from the biological. This paper focuses on the case of umbilical cord blood (UCB) banking, which is organized in two main models: a public system managing the supply of UCB units for transplantation and a private sector offering to families the opportunity to store UCB for private uses. The two models are deemed as based on different ethics and entailing opposing values and economic logics: the public system is based on altruistic donation, promotes social solidarity and works in the framework of redistributive economy; private banking is running for profit, is built on self-interest and fosters a market economy of biomedical services. This paper analyzes the different national responses in regulating UCB banking vis-à-vis the setting of international rules, standards and protocols for harmonizing national regulations and enabling the global exchange of UCB units for transplants. Focusing on the case of some European countries (the UK, Germany, Italy, France, Spain and Austria), the paper shows how different configurations of this biomedical technology emerge from the interrelation between technical, ethical, economic and logistical considerations. The aim is to show how these configurations are evolving toward hybrid UCB banking models blurring the distinction between the market and the state and thus the related ethical and societal implications.