Plan to expand newborn disorder-screening project

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BANGKOK-based Siriraj Hospital has hailed the success of its project to provide a free service to check newborn babies for dozens of inherited metabolic disorders in a bid to prevent mental handicaps. Indeed, it now wants to expand it nationwide.

The project, carried out since 2014 in collaboration with the National Health Security Office (NHSO) and 13 other hospitals in the capital, will complete its pilot phase in next two years.

Dr Prasit Watanapa, dean of Mahidol University's Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj Hospital, said the initiative stemmed from Siriraj's decade-old project to screen newborns for congenital hypothyroidism (CH) and phenylketonuria (PKU).

In that time, some 500,000 babies were screened and 80 CH cases and six PKU cases were found.

Medical genetics expert and Siriraj adviser Dr Pornsawan Wasan said that early diagnosis before symptoms developed would boost the chance of a normal existence.

She cited a Chulalongkorn Hospital study that found a child with a mental handicap required 

BT8 million for life-long care on average, which highlighted the need for preventative measures.

If the Public Health Ministry agrees to expand the scheme nationwide, there would be a need to prepare expert manpower for this task because currently there are only 10 paediatricians with genetics expertise and 20 to 30 doctors with hormonal disorder expertise nationwide.

Siriraj medical genetics expert Dr Nithiwat Vatanavechorn said it was vital to submit newborns for the tandem mass spectrometry blood test 48 to 72 hours after birth in a bid to prevent a physical disability or a mental handicap.

Other participating medical facilities include Bhumibol Adulyadej, Phramongkutkao, Somdej Prapinklao and Police General hospitals.