

Can Scottish doctors help baby Sabina beat cancer?

Romanian family's fears over costs of trip

HELEN PUTTICK
HEALTH CORRESPONDENT

THE parents of a six-month-old Romanian girl with a rare form of cancer have brought her to Scotland in the hope that doctors can save her life.

Florentin and Cristina Cimpeanu, of Bucharest, believed Sabina, their daughter, would die from hepatoblastoma, a liver condition that affects one in a million children each year.

In their search for information on the illness, they made contact with Jon Pritchard, a consultant at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh and one of a small number of experts on the condition, and for the first time realised Sabina could survive.

After raising £8500 by pooling savings and borrowing from friends and family, they flew to Edinburgh, where Sabina has had chemotherapy.

However, the couple, who said they earn around £150 a month, need to find a total of £25,500 to cover all the care Sabina will need at the hospital.

The couple are waiting to discover when the instalment they have already paid will run out. They are concerned they will not be able to raise the extra funds to pay for surgery which Sabina is scheduled to have in early September.

The operation will remove part of her liver, but livers are able to regenerate. Trials have shown that, with modern medicine, babies with Sabina's condition have up to an 82% chance of survival.

Mr Cimpeanu said: "We are

worried about the money. This is the single worry for us. They are so very good here, the doctors and the staff."

When Sabina was first feverish and sleepy in early June her parents thought she was suffering a cold. However when they took her to a doctor he immediately sent her for an abdominal scan.

Mr Cimpeanu, an electronics engineer, said they were lucky. "We have heard about cases that took much longer to be diagnosed, took years, because the symptoms are very common."

Instead, within days they were told Sabina was likely to

'We started to think why us? – probably the same question as anyone'

have hepatoblastoma. Her tumour was 11cm in size.

Mr Cimpeanu said: "We started to think 'why us?' – probably the same question as anyone when there is something wrong."

They began sifting the internet for information, e-mailing every possible organisation, and received a reply from Dr Pritchard. He is a member of The International Childhood Liver Tumour Strategy Group, which brings together experts on the unusual cancer to develop and promote research.

Mrs Cimpeanu said: "He told us she had a chance."

When the couple saw how ill

Sabina was after her first bout of chemotherapy in Romania, they resolved to bring her to Scotland. They said they were encouraged by their oncologist in Romania, as few cases of the illness are handled at home.

After blood transfusions and intravenous medication, she was well enough to cope with the three-and-a-half hour flight to London and five-hour train journey to Edinburgh.

Mr Cimpeanu has taken unpaid leave from his job.

His wife, who has a PhD in chemistry and works in research, is on maternity leave.

Food in Romania, they said, is only a little cheaper than here and they struggle to meet living expenses.

They have already appealed for help on Romanian TV and hope others may be willing to help raise the funds they need.

Mrs Cimpeanu said they also wanted to share their experience because they had received support from other families with experience of the situation.

David Bolton, chief operating officer of university hospitals division NHS Lothian, said: "The second course of treatment has been started in the hospital. This will be followed by an operation and further courses of chemotherapy.

"It is an expensive procedure and the financial assurances that were given when all this was arranged still have to be fully investigated. Until that investigation is complete we cannot comment further. We would naturally support any fundraising that will help towards the cost of this."