

## Australian university in stem cell land row

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One of Australia's leading universities is facing increasing criticism from academics across the country for agreeing not to do stem cell research on land it bought from a Roman Catholic college.

The University of Sydney has approved a deal with St John's College, which will see the Catholic residential college hand over land for the Sydney Institute of Health and Medical Research on the condition that no foetal stem cell research be conducted there.

The controversial deal was reached despite the university confirming it had alternative sites for the institute that would not have required a compromise on the type of research it could do. While university officials note that there are no restrictions on its research with stem cells in other facilities, critics say that the university is endangering academic freedom.

Ian Kerridge, the director of the Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, which would come under the auspices of the institute, told the Sydney Morning Herald: "It's definitely sending a message to the community about the independence of the university and its desire to pursue education and research according to the community's values and needs.

"My major concern is not in relation to the church's position on stem cell research and cloning ... it's more whether it's acceptable for the university to adopt those and what that means if it does."

The Academy of Science, which is modelled on the Royal Society, has warned that Australia will earn a reputation of the "religious views of the landlord" taking priority over research.

A statement from the Australian academy said: "Parliament just passed laws that agree with this position and these agree with the laws in the United States and United Kingdom.

"It seems unreal that a religious group can pursue their minority views and stop medical research at one of our top universities from taking advantage of every means to help prevent and treat diseases like motor neurone disease, cancer and cystic fibrosis."

The university's vice-chancellor, Gavin Brown, said the college had originally wanted a wider ban on all research contrary to the ethical beliefs of the Catholic Church.

Prof Brown said the deal would not prevent embryonic stem cell research elsewhere on campus. He said: "The conditions were purely a question of where certain things would be done, not whether they could be done."

David Daintree, the St John's College rector, said he would not have agreed to release the land if the university had not agreed to his conditions.

He told the Herald: "If they had found it unpalatable they did have alternative sites. They made that clear to us from the beginning."

A spokesman for the university said other sites had been investigated but the church site "allows for much more creativity and a much bigger and better building."