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Deal to ban fetal research at uni site

Lisa Macnamara and Adam Cresswell

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FETAL stem-cell research would be banned at Sydney University's new cutting-edge medical research institute under an extraordinary multi-million-dollar deal between the university and Australia's oldest Catholic college.

Amid increasing concern about Catholic-run institutions imposing ethical conditions on its hospitals, academics and researchers would be forced to use facilities elsewhere in Sydney University under the ban.

Health experts and students expressed outrage at the proposal - modelled on an original deed dated back to the 1850s and approved by the university hierarchy last night - saying it was the latest example of the Catholic Church trying to interfere in medical research.

Under the deal, the Sydney campus would agree to the restriction at its proposed new health and medical research facility as a condition of St John's residential college releasing the vacant site at Camperdown.

The proposed deed between the college and the university says "no part of the building (can be) used for human fetal stem-cell medical research or any other procedures involving the termination of human life or the artificial creation of human life".

St John's College rector David Daintree yesterday was unapologetic about the conditions.

"We as a Catholic college have a problem with termination of life, abortion and euthanasia," he said. "We're independent of the Catholic Church but (we) felt that in ceding land to the university we ought to do what we could to ensure that it wasn't used for things that we would, as a group, have a conscience problem with - and the university was very obliging."

The new eight-building facility, planned for 2011, will house researchers from across the biosciences but the university said those who engaged in the restricted study areas would have to do so elsewhere on campus or "across the road" at nearby Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

"This has no impact on any other medical research carried out anywhere else in the university - there are lots of other areas of medical research in the University of Sydney that are not on this specific piece of land," a university spokesman said.

The Australian revealed last month that certain services had been withdrawn from the Canberra Fertility Clinic after Catholic-controlled healthcare operators bought the private hospital where it was located.

It was also revealed that sexually assaulted women who sought help at Catholic-run hospitals could not be referred to rape crisis centres that supplied the morning-after pill, under Catholic healthcare sector policy.

Sydney University said the college requested the conditions, to maintain the spirit of the original agreement granting the land to St John's in the 1850s.

But Dr Daintree said the college's reasoning for the special clause was "purely ethical".

Director of the Sydney University-based Australian Health Policy Institute Stephen Leeder said the limitation sounded "very odd" and was another example of Catholic ethics conflicting with the imperatives of medical research.

"It should be kept separate - I'm not saying they (the church) don't have the right to determine ... how to use their own property, but when it comes into public use these caveats become very difficult to enforce," he said. "It's hard to think of too many forms of research that do not have strong genetic and regenerative involvement in them and no one can predict where scientific research is going to go."

Queensland University executive dean of health sciences Peter Brooks said it was "dangerous" for any university to enter deals with such caveats.

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