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Uni caveat: no stem cell research

Harriet Alexander Higher Education Reporter
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THE University of Sydney has paid one if its residential colleges \$600,000 for land to build a medical research centre, but only on the condition it is never used to carry out foetal stem cell research.

The agreement with St Johns College has raised concerns about academic freedom within the new research institute.

If the senate approves the deal - it was due to be debated last night - St Johns College will renounce its rights to the land so the university can build the Sydney Institute of Health and Medical Research. In return, the university must agree not to use the buildings to participate in "human foetal stem cell medical research or any other procedures involving the termination or the artificial creation of human life".

The president of the Student Representative Council, Angus McFarland, said: "These conditions are an ideological attack on the principals of freedom of academic research. University research should be as independent and rigorous as possible."

The institute will act as a research hub that will encompass existing centres for cancer, respiratory medicine, brain, ageing, surgery, obstetrics and endocrine research, among other disciplines.

The university has paid the college a non-refundable \$600,000 and undertaken to use "reasonable endeavours" to obtain the approval of the senate. If the deal goes through, it will pay at least \$11 million.

The complex of eight buildings will eventually cost the university up to \$350 million, said Andrew Potter, a spokesman for the university.

The Royal Prince Alfred Hospital would continue to undertake foetal stem cell research, so any researcher who needed to use or participate in that could gain access it across the road, he said.

"Ninety-nine per cent of these people would not be involved in foetal stem cell research anyway," Mr Potter said.

But the Greens candidate John Kaye said the ban on stem cell research at the institute would have wide-ranging consequences for public benefit research.

"It's fundamental to universities that they have free enquiry," Mr Kaye said.

"Restricting the scientific investigation that can be undertaken at a university institute is not only an attack on academic independence but also establishes an unacceptable precedent.

"Allowing an agreement such as this to dictate limits in scientific investigation opens a very dangerous door to a wide range of organisations to bias research to meet their prejudices."

Dr Kuldip Sidhu, a stem cell researcher at the University of NSW, said organisations should cease placing restrictions on stem cell research, since legislation had been passed in favour of the practice.

"This field is going to be very big, particularly for these kind of diseases where we don't have a cure," Dr Sidhu said. "If these kind of restrictions are put in right from the beginning, we would be cutting short what we can do."

The Garvan Institute, which researches stem cells and works closely with St Vincent's Hospital, has not run into conflict with the hospital's Catholic teachings because it did not use foetal cells, said Professor John Shine, executive director of the Garvan Institute. Scientists around the world were working out how to best re-program people's own cells instead, he said.

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