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Rendell proposes \$500 million state investment in bioscience

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HARRISBURG - Gov. Rendell announced a proposal to invest as much as \$1 billion to expand the state's bioscience research industry, touching off debate over one of the most promising - and controversial - areas of bioscience: embryonic stem cell research.

Rendell said as part of his budget proposal next week he will ask the General Assembly to approve a plan to borrow \$500 million over two years in matching grants to increase laboratory space at universities and research centers and hire more top-level researchers.

The program, named after renowned Pittsburgh scientist Dr. Jonas Salk, who developed the polio vaccine, would provide matching grants to bioscience researchers in academia and industry.

But he said the program is "not designed" to promote stem cell research, which under Pennsylvania law, may be illegal. The research is already taking place in private hospitals and research facilities around the state.

"It will operate within the parameters of the Pennsylvania law," said Rendell.

Republicans pronounced the plan dead on arrival - on fiscal not moral grounds.

"Any new borrowing is not up for discussion," said Steve Miskin, spokesman for House Majority Leader Rep. Sam Smith (R., Jefferson).

But percolating beneath the surface is the controversial issue stem cell research and question of whether it is allowed under the state's abortion control act.

A 2001 mandate by President Bush has effectively blocked federal funding for new embryonic stem cell research, but a number of states, including New Jersey and Maryland, are promoting state-funded stem cell initiatives.

California received national attention when voters approved a \$3 billion stem cell initiative in 2004 but that program has been slowed.

Among the top priorities outlined earlier this week by New Jersey Gov. Corzine is pressing the legislature pass a bill approving stem cell research funding.

Embryonic stem cells are the basic building blocks of all types of human tissues, including blood, heart and nerves. Scientists believe these wondrous cells may be programmed to turn into new tissue that could one day be used to treat diseases ranging from diabetes to Alzheimer's.

The Republican-controlled Pennsylvania General Assembly has avoided the issue entirely, even though questions remain about whether state funding would be legal under the state abortion control act.

Rep. Dan Frankel (D., Allegheny), who has advocated for state stem cell research funding says the abortion act would allow stem cell research.

"The act bans fetal research," said Frankel. "I don't believe stem cell research is the same thing."

Republican leaders have no intention of raising the subject.

"There is no appetite in the General Assembly to broach that subject," said Miskin.

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