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Medical innovation program kicks off

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A program that would make Iowa a center of medical innovation was kicked off Friday by state leaders and Richard Gephardt, the former congressman from Missouri.

"This is the most exciting thing I've ever done. I've come out of every one of these meetings just uplifted with what can happen here. It's really optimistic, it's possible, doable and feasible," said Gephardt, chairman of the Council for American Medical Innovation.

The council is made up of medical, education, research and business groups that came together to lobby Congress to pass legislation that will enhance medical technologies and breakthroughs.

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The group argues that without additional focus, the United States will fall behind in key medical research areas that not only employ large numbers of people but, more important, save lives.

One goal, for example, is to find ways that Congress can encourage medical companies to better share test results on drugs or other medical procedures.

Currently, many of the tests are considered intellectual property and kept private at the detriment of medical advancement, Gephardt said.

On Friday the council, along with Gov. Chet Culver and state education and business officials, launched a yearlong program, known as "Innovate Iowa."

The program aims to use existing agricultural, education and research groups to target job creation in medical fields. A conference on the issue will be planned in January.

The Iowa program will also help focus the council's congressional agenda and help develop ideas of how Congress can create laws or incentives to help foster medical advancements.

Gephardt has a 39-year-old son who, at age 2, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The boy survived because of powerful advancements in medical innovations. It's one of the reasons why the former U.S. House majority leader said he is involved.

"He's 39, works for me every day, and he wouldn't be here if it weren't for good health insurance and great discoveries," Gephardt said. "Everybody goes through that. Everybody has a family story that's similar. It's the most important thing of all. Nothing equals it."

Gephardt was the 1988 Democratic presidential caucus winner in Iowa. He ran again for president in 2004, but dropped out after finishing fourth in the caucuses.

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