In a unanimous ruling on Friday, a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. circuit upheld an earlier court decision permitting the use of federal funding for research involving already-derived embryonic stem cells. Since no human embryos are destroyed in such research, the court ruled that these studies may continue receiving grants from the National Institutes of Health and other federal sources.

Stem cell research, especially embryonic stem cell research, has long been a contentious issue, with many religious groups arguing against its use. Such opponents claim that it’s unacceptable to destroy a human embryo in order to obtain its cells—an argument that gave rise to the 1996 Dickey-Wicker amendment, which forbade the use of federal funds in research that directly destroys embryos. Then, while in office, President George W. Bush expanded this ban to prohibit federal funding of any human embryonic stem cell research whatsoever, with the exception of certain projects that were already underway.

Upon becoming president, however, Barack Obama issued an executive order reversing the extended ban, once again allowing the NIH to fund embryonic stem cell research as long as no federal money was used to directly destroy human embryos in the process of obtaining the stem cells.

However, in 2009, Dr. James Sherley of Boston Biomedical Research Institute and Theresa Deisher of AVM Biotechnology in Seattle sued to block President Obama’s new guidelines. The issue has been stuck in court ever since, with the latest ruling coming down on the side of the U.S. government.

I’m pleased with the court’s decision, says ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross, since stem cells have such vast potential to solve currently insoluble medical problems, including illnesses such as ALS and perhaps, eventually, Alzheimer’s disease. Certainly, to continue scientific advances in this field, research on stem cells must not be discouraged.