

Christian groups cheer halt to stem cell funding

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Conservative Christian groups won a major victory recently when a Washington judge halted federal funding of embryonic stem cell research to allow a suit challenging the practice as illegal to go forward.

The suit, filed by a group of doctors and the nonprofit agency Nightlight Christian Adoptions, says federal funding of embryonic stem cells limits the number of fertilized embryos the agency can make available to couples seeking to "adopt" them from fertility clinics. The suit also says the practice violates a 1996 law prohibiting federal funding for research in which embryos are "destroyed, discarded or knowingly subjected to risk of injury or death."

President Obama lifted restrictions on federal funding in March 2009, and the National Institutes of Health issued ethical guidelines for the research four months later. However, U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth, who had initially dismissed the suit, said August 23 that the research and the NIH guidelines clearly violate the 1996 law.

Embryonic stem cell (ESC) research "is clearly research in which an embryo is destroyed," Lamberth wrote. "To conduct ESC research, ESCs must be derived from an embryo. The process of deriving ESCs from an embryo results in the destruction of the embryo."

Lamberth also found that opening up federal funding of ESC research increased competition. He said potential research delays caused by his ruling are "speculative."

After the ruling, the NIH said it had "suspended" all applications for federal research funding on embryonic stem cells. Justice Department announced that the Obama administration will appeal the court decision.

"From what we can tell, this would also stop the research that President [George W.] Bush had allowed to go forward early in his presidency," White House spokesperson Bill Burton said, according to *USA Today*.

Conservative activists, led by the Family Research Council and the Alliance Defense Fund, quickly claimed victory. "Embryonic stem cell research is irresponsible and scientifically unworthy," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, adding that the NIH guidelines "implemented a plan that forced taxpayers to foot the bill for research that is human embryo destructive." —RNS