Pope Francis recently hosted McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School stem cell researcher Ole Isacson at part of a conference on neurodegenerative diseases.

While the Catholic Church has come out against embryonic stem cell research, Isacson’s studies involve adult stem cells derived from skill cells, therefore bypassing concerns of abortion opponents.

Isacson was part of a three day conference at the Vatican this month entitled “The Church at the Service of Sick Elderly People: Care for People with Neurodegenerative Pathologies.” The event, which was attended by 700 people, was organized by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers.

The Catholic Church said it selected neurodegenerative diseases as a focus for the conference because of the swelling unmet medical need in disease areas such as Parkinson’s Disease and Alzheimer’s disease. It is estimated that 7.7 million new cases of neurodegenerative disease appear each year, and by 2030 more than 65 million people worldwide are expected to be living with a neurodegenerative illness.

“It’s great that Pope Francis is making aging and regenerative treatments a top priority in 2013,” Isacson said in a statement. “As an academic member, it is an honor to speak on this global issue in an effort to increase awareness for neurodegenerative diseases impacting the elderly, and the treatments that are being developed.”

Isacson is credited with helping to advance potential therapies for Parkinson’s and other neurodegenerative diseases, both those aimed at protecting vulnerable neurons and replacing those destroyed by disease. Isacson has shown that it is possible to reverse cell loss with the implantation of neurons grown from pluripotent stem cells, which could restore brain function.