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New drug to halt dementia after multiple head injuries

By: Caroline Riches in News, Top Stories June 16, 2021 0

Sportspeople who sustain repeated blows to the head throughout their career could be spared the onset of dementia as a consequence, after a world-first study identified a new drug that halts the post-concussion development of a protein that causes the condition.

Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is the term used to describe the progressive brain degeneration likely caused by repeated head traumas.

A team of researchers from Adelaide, Melbourne and the United States led by the University of South Australia showed how the brain releases a neurotransmitter called substance P in the event of a head injury.

This substance causes abnormal amounts of a protein known as hyperphosphorylated tau to collect inside neurons, which affects cognition and behaviour.

The university's Emeritus Professor Bob Vink says blocking substance P with a specially developed drug is key to preventing tau protein – and this way CTE – from developing.

"Tau protein tangles are a feature of CTE, which reportedly leads to memory problems, confusion, personality changes, aggression, depression and suicidal thinking," Prof Vink said in a statement.

"Our research shows that by blocking substance P with a specific drug, we can prevent the tau protein tangles from developing in the brain and causing neurological problems."

The findings could carry significant benefits for athletes who play contact sports – such as boxers and footballers – as well as military veterans sustaining head injuries in conflict.

The drug has already proven successful in preventing CTE in animals. Prof Vink says the next step is human clinical trials, but they could take several years given CTE can currently only be diagnosed post-mortem.

'NK1 antagonists attenuate tau phosphorylation after blast and repeated concussive injury' is published in Scientific Reports and can be found [here](#).

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