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Pentagon gives UF \$2.2 million for test

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On the eve of a possible war with Iraq, the Department of Defense has given University of Florida researchers \$2.2 million to develop a diagnostic blood test for battlefield brain injuries. Usually diagnosed through scanning, brain injuries claim 25 percent of soldiers killed in action, according to the Pentagon, yet there is no practical way to assess their severity under combat conditions. So scientists at UF's McKnight Brain Institute and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research are trying to develop a test for the protein markers in blood and cerebrospinal fluid that indicate damage. Dr. Ronald Hayes, director of the Center for Traumatic Brain Injury Studies at McKnight, calls the markers "clues to the murder" of brain cells. "In national emergencies or on the battlefield, the first priority is triage," which helps medics decide how to use limited resources, Hayes said. He said the test could be available in three years. Traumatic brain injuries cost more than \$48 billion a year, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, which reports that up to 6 ½ million Americans are living with such conditions. But the real goal, Hayes said, "is to develop a brain wellness test. There are a lot of brain functions that deteriorate with age . . . and there is some evidence of cognitive deficits with aging [unrelated to Alzheimer's disease] that could be diagnosed and medicated appropriately."

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