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Footballers could be risking dementia by suffering repeated minor injuries when they head the ball.

The potential cause of the condition, thought to arise from blows to the head has, for the first time, been confirmed in a group of retired footballers following a small study. Sky's Tom Parmenter reports. On the surface, Ernie Moss looks every part the healthy former footballer. He still is Chesterfield's all-time leading goal-scorer. Where's this? Chesterfield? He now needs his family like never before. Dementia is taking away the Ernie they knew and loved. He played in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. He has the medals and the scars to prove it. The most obvious ones were the eye and head injuries. I can't tell you how many times he's been covered up around his eyes. They used to go off the pitch, stitched, back on, shirt's covered in blood, and that was the norm. The latest medical research is a study of a small group

of footballers in Wales that suggests there is a link between football and brain injuries. But still stops short of confirming one. It is not a structured study, and we don't have other data in terms of the quantitative measure of the exposure of hitting of the head, and so on, so we need to interpret our finding with larger scale studies with caution. A study last year at Stirling University concluded heading a ball does change the brain and can affect a player's memory. I think football as a whole is burying its head in the sand. Ernie's family say they don't need further research - they just know. His daughter, who has lost the dad she grew up with, has lost count of the number of former professionals suffering similar conditions. To be dumping them in an old people's home is wrong.

They need a specialist facility, and football has got so much money, so much money in it at the minute - you know, we don't want millions of compensation. If there was a home, a facility, that dad could go, we know that mum's not got to sell her home, know he's going to be cared for properly, that's what we would like. The FA say they have changed the way head injuries are dealt with, and also want more comprehensive medical research. The evidence still isn't conclusive. Let's discuss this more with Dr Mark Weatherall - a neurologist at Charing Cross hospital. He joins us from Amersham. Welcome to you. As the report made clear, we are of being able to say definitively that there is a link between heading a football and

developing a brain injury that may then lead to something more serious as one ages. There is a sense in which the anecdotal is becoming a bit more evidence based? Yes, I think that is absolutely right. I. I mean, I first saw a couple of cases like this when I was training in Preston 20 years ago. People playing for Preston in Blackpool back in the 1950s who then later developed dementia or motor neurone disease or other degenerative diseases and we wondered whether there might be a link. Is that because there was a disparity between what you would see ordinarily of the population in terms of early-onset dementia, and the factor seems to be more formal professional footballers affected? Well, when we saw them it was simply just a coincidence that we saw 23 people in a relatively short period of time and that makes you wonder.

And those things can happen by chance but as time has gone on, particularly when information coming from other sports, you know, particularly American football and all the work that has been done in the States and this country on the pathology of chronic traumatic injury, there were initial thoughts of this might being relevant coming back to the fore. With this being published today, this really suggests that there may be a blink, at least in some people in some cases, to the occupation they have had in the past. And it is important to stress that, we're not talking about recreational football, people playing on Sunday league side once a week, in the park. These are men who were playing in the post-war years, who quite recently, for some of them, and they were heading footballs which were heavier than

now, which may not have helped? Yes, that is certainly true although the authors point out in the paper that the modern football is a lighter but travel faster so therefore the forces involved may be quite similar. But I think it is more the repetitive nature of the exposure. If heading the football is the culprit, and we don't know for sure, but if it is, it is the repetitive nature, long periods of playing, it several hours a day, heading drills, and also, the effect of repeated collisions, head collisions, during games, one of the striking things in the paper is that pretty much all of these players only really had one serious concussion during their playing life but they will have had a number of repeated head injuries with clashes of heads and so on. Presumably it is simply the action of the brain inside the skull being,

sustaining a succession of minor bruises and there being no way of circumventing that, there is no way of heading the ball safely. No, I think that is right. Other research that has been interesting and quite exciting recently is some of the work that is being done showing the very early effects of concussion type head injuries and some of the physical effects that can have and that what is the basis for the recommendations in rugby about time off after concussion injuries to ensure that you do not repeatedly put the brain under stress. So, yes, we don't know what is safe, how much is safe, and we still don't know for certain that heading is the culprit here. For recreational football, four children going out and kicking

a ball around or heading the ball, there is nothing to say that this is in any way unsafe and the benefits of the exercise clearly outweigh any risks, if there are risks, in all but a small minority of people who spend a huge amount of time heading. Can you foresee a time in the next 25 years in professional footballers are barred, it becomes illegal on the pitch, to head the ball? Can you see that? Erm... I think it is very difficult to say. I personally think it is unlikely that will be the case. There may be recommendations in terms of training and the amount of exposure to heading in training and so on. Who knows? I mean, this is really still very early days. This is a fascinating paper which fits in with a lot of what we know from NFL and boxing and other sports. And it is an increasing

amount of evidence that in a very small number of people, these types of sports and what they involve can often only cause problems but we need a lot more information about exactly what is going on and who is prone to this and who is not. Is there are literally thousands, tens thousands of people who have played professional football in this era, he did not develop dementia and lift healthily into old age. So, we need to understand a bit about the background of why some people are prone to this and not others. And that is all work that the team at clean square and in the states are doing and it will be very interesting and important and constructive to see what comes of it