Long footballing career can damage the brain, scientists find

Suspicions stirred by Jeff Astle’s death confirmed by study of head injuries

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Scientists have found early signs that a long footballing career spent heading the ball can cause the type of damage to the brain previously seen among boxers and American football players. Sample the FT’s top stories for a week You select the topic, we deliver the news. Select topic Enter email addressInvalid email Sign up By signing up you confirm that you have read and agree to the terms and conditions, cookie policy and privacy policy. Suspicions that heading the ball may cause long-term damage to the brain emerged more than a decade ago after the death of Jeff Astle, the former England and West Bromwich Albion striker. Astle died of a degenerative brain disease and the coroner said the cause of death had been due to repeated minor injuries to the brain. Researchers at University College London found evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a potential cause of dementia, in four out of six former players following postmortem brain examinations. Helen Ling and Huw Morris at UCL’s Institute of Neurology had been tracking 14 retired footballers with dementia who were referred to the old age psychiatry service in Swansea between 1980 and 2010. Although the sample size was small, researchers said the incidence of CTE among footballers exceeded the 12 per cent population average seen in previous studies. Roxana Carare, an expert from the University of Southampton, said the UCL researchers had “formulated a reasonable hypothesis” and that work required “careful follow-up of a larger number of footballers”. She added: “Already there may be enough evidence to examine the pattern of head injuries, particularly during games of professional football.” Already there may be enough evidence to examine the pattern of head injuries, particularly during games of professional football Roxana Carare, University of Southampton But Professor Morris on Tuesday urged caution around the findings and said the risks of recreational football to children playing the sport was “extremely low”. Rather than the result of a severe concussion, the damage had been done by decades of “subconcussions” from heading the ball, clashing with other players or colliding with the goalpost. The ex-footballers whose brains were studied had played regularly for an average of 26 years. Players today do not head the heavy, often water-soaked balls that were used during Astle’s career. But Prof Morris said modern synthetic balls, though much lighter, travelled at greater speed and with greater force, meaning the risk of injury remained. In the US, a class-action lawsuit brought by a group of footballers and their parents was filed in 2014 asking several organisations, including Fifa and the US Soccer Federation, to introduce better policies in managing and evaluating concussion. The Football Association, the sport’s governing body in England, welcomed the research and said it would support further work into understanding whether degenerative brain diseases were more common among former footballers. Charlotte Cowie, the FA’s head of medicine, said the organisation was funding further research in the area jointly with the Professional Footballers’ Association, the players’ trade union. Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.