Are soccer players more prone to developing dementia?

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A large study is being funded by Britain’s soccer associations to try to determine whether players are more prone to developing dementia.

The announcement was made on Friday by the associations after they used a meeting of soccer’s lawmaking body to back the introduction of electronic devices on the sidelines to enhance player welfare, including assessing potential concussions by watching video replays.

The renewed focus on degenerative damage to footballers’ brains follows research published last month that highlighted potential dangers of repeated blows to the head in soccer. Six of 14 former players were found to have signs of Alzheimer’s disease after their brains underwent post-mortem examinations.

A greater sample size is required for fresh research and English Football Association chief executive Martin Glenn said that a “massive” study led by university researchers will receive “six figures” in funding without specifying further as to the estimated amount.

“We’re obviously taking it seriously, but one has to be proportionate,” said Glenn, who was alongside his counterparts from the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish federations. “The research that we’re scoping out ... is really to look at one simple thing: Is the incidence of dementia greater in professional footballers, or former professional footballers, than it is in the population as a whole? You need lots and lots of data on that.”

The research published last month by University College London and Britain’s National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery showed that four brains were found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) pathology. That was a possible consequence of repeated impacts to the brain, including heading the ball and concussion injuries from head-to-head collisions.

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“The ball today weighs 450 grammes — it’s a different ball,” Glenn said. “What might the impact be of heading the ball today?”

In 2015, the US Soccer Federation recommended a ban on headers for players 10 and under in a bid to address concerns about the impact of head injuries. The United States has also seen a US$1 billion settlement between the NFL and thousands of its former American football players who have been diagnosed with brain injuries linked to repeated concussions.

“It’s a massively different game,” Glenn said. “We have to be proportionate but also curious. It is so different you have to expect our response will be different to the NFL’s.”

Glenn was speaking at a news conference at Wembley Stadium after a meeting of The International Board Association Board, including FIFA President Gianni Infantino. The global governing body said last month that “to our very best knowledge, there is currently no true evidence of the negative effect of heading or other sub-concussive blows.”

“If you want zero risk in life you shouldn’t drive a car anymore, you shouldn’t go skiing anymore, you shouldn’t practise any sport,” Infantino said. “When these studies are done, let’s wait for the results.”

At least four members of England’s 1966 World Cup-winning squad have developed dementia or memory loss. Concerns have grown in Britain about the impact of head injuries after campaigning by the family of former England striker Jeff Astle, whose death at age 59 in 2002 was attributed to repeatedly heading heavy, leather balls.