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DOD funds project to develop brain trauma detector

By Peter Buxbaum Published on May 6, 2008

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The Defense Department has granted the Brain Trauma Foundation of New York City \$4.6 million to develop an eye-tracking device that will enable military personnel to determine if a soldier has been subjected to traumatic brain injury, or TBI.

An initial product is scheduled delivery by the end of this year, said Dr. Jamshid Ghajar, president of the foundation, with improvements during the reminder of the four-year grant period.

Ghajar's research has shown that TBI occurs when a blast causes a rapid rotation in the neck and head that tears tissue in the brain's interior, resulting in a reduced ability to concentrate. Ghajar's device is designed to measure how well a patient's eyes are able to follow a moving object.

Optimal human attention involves the ability to synchronize what is going on in the present with an expectation of what will happen next, Ghajar explained. In TBI cases, "the timing is off, and the victim tries to compensate."

The device being developed will have patients view a moving dot using virtual reality goggles. The device will take readings of the eye reaction every millisecond and calculate the mean reaction time.

"We'll get a thousand data points every second," Ghajar said. "This should be able to give us a reading on TBI in 30 seconds. The fastest test available now takes 20 minutes."

The device will also include a high-speed camera to capture eye movements and software to analyze the signal. There will be a color-coded readout with green indicating no injury, yellow meaning that the patient is showing signs of compensating and red signaling that the soldier should immediately return to base.

The Brain Trauma Foundation, together with its partner on the project, the Boston-based engineering firm Foster-Miller Inc., are developing a database of normative values for eye reactions taking into account the subjects' age and level of fatigue. This is being done by testing soldiers stationed at the U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center, in Natick, Mass.

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