



AM – ABC Local Radio

Researchers discover viral link to MS

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Reporter: Richard Lindell

TONY EASTLEY: Researchers at the University of Queensland may have found a link between the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) and the development of multiple sclerosis.

Ninety per cent of people carry EBV virus, but this study shows that those with MS may be unable to control the level of EBV in their brains.

Richard Lindell reports.

RICHARD LINDELL: Eighteen thousand Australians have multiple sclerosis.

The exact cause is still unknown although these researchers believe it might have something to do with the Epstein-Barr virus.

That's the virus that causes glandular fever. Most of us are infected with it but few people show symptoms, or go on to develop MS.

Professor Michael Pender led the research at the University of Queensland.

MICHAEL PENDER: Well our new research indicates that people with MS have a decreased immunity to EBV, that is a decreased ability to control EBV and this may allow EBV-infected B cells to accumulate in the brain and cause multiple sclerosis.

RICHARD LINDELL: MS attacks the nervous system with chronic symptoms that include fatigue, muscle weakness, tremors and short-term memory loss.

There's no cure, but this latest study provides some hope that researchers are a step closer to finding the cause and effective treatments.

MICHAEL PENDER: The hope from this work is that by boosting, well by methods of controlling EBV infection, such as by vaccination, boosting immunity by EBV vaccination, may prevent MS but also controlling EBV infection in other ways, such as anti-viral drugs, may be beneficial in people who already have MS and may help to stop the disease getting worse. But more work is needed to be done.

RICHARD LINDELL: John Pollard is an Emeritus Professor of medicine at the University of Sydney. He says the study is interesting, but agrees more work needs to be done before new treatments can be considered.

JOHN POLLARD: The evidence about Epstein-Barr virus is still circumstantial, as I say, it is not proven. So yes it is too far to go to say that anti-virals will cure MS or that vaccines will cure it. One can only go that far when this proposition is proven and it is by no means that at the moment.

It is very interesting data. It is a very interesting idea. Professor Pender has obtained a lot of international interest because of his views and they are cogent views but they remain unproven.

TONY EASTLEY: Professor John Pollard of the University of Sydney ending that report by Richard Lindell.