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Stem cells 'turn into brain cells'

Scientists have taken an important step forward in their bid to use stem cells to cure serious brain diseases.

Researchers in the United States have shown these master cells can turn into any type of brain cell in mice.

Stem cells are unique in that they can turn into any other cell in the body.

Scientists believe they could one day be used to repair or replace damaged cells in the body and cure a wide range of diseases.

Stem cells are seen as a potential way of reversing the effects of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other similar diseases in the brain.

Laboratory tests

Dr Walter Low and colleagues at the University of Minnesota Medical School carried out tests on mice to see if stem cells could indeed turn into other brain cells.

They injected stem cells, taken from adult mice, into a mouse blastocyst - a mouse in the early embryonic stage.

The result was the birth of what scientists call a chimerical animal - an animal that shows the presence of both their own cells and the transplanted stem cells.

Tests showed these transplanted cells had developed into nerve cells.

Further analysis showed they had grown in areas of the brain that are generally affected by a range of diseases, including Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis, Huntington's and Alzheimer's.



Stem cell research could transform treatment for some diseases

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"This research takes our findings a step further," said Dr Walter Low, who headed the study.

The researchers are now planning to continue their research to see if stem cells can repair damage in mice with brain diseases.

"The next step is to test what happens when the adult stem cells are used to treat mice and rats with neurological disorders," said Dirk Keene, one of those involved in the study.

The researchers said they hoped to finish those tests within one year.

The findings are published in the journal Cell Transplantation.

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