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Funding boost for new projects at the Centre for Brain Research

The Neurological Foundation of New Zealand has awarded nearly one third of its 2009 funding round to scientists at the Centre for Brain Research. Over \$400,000 will go to six research groups across the Centre, which is part of The University of Auckland.

Associate Professors Tom Brittain and Nigel Birch along with Dr Joanna Skomer from the School of Biological Sciences were granted \$111,177 to progress their research on the relatively newly discovered protein neuroglobin. It's thought the protein protects brain cells from the cell death or damage seen in brain disease.

The funding will enable the team to investigate the structure of the protein, and could lead to the design of small molecules which might potentially be used to reduce the brain damage which follows stroke or neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease.

Stroke research also received a boost, with \$105,623 awarded for a new clinical trial aiming to improve rehabilitation outcomes after long-term stroke. Leading the team is Dr Cathy Stinear from the Neurology Research Unit in the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, along with Professor Alan Barber who is the Deputy Director of the CBR, and Professor Winston Byblow's Movement Neuroscience team in the Department of Sport and Exercise Science.

Thanks to their work on a high-tech method to 'prime' the brain for therapy, chronic stroke patients could now be treated even years after their stroke. Patients will receive a two week burst of physiotherapy for their hand and arm, alongside a non-invasive magnetic stimulation technique which primes the brain for a better response to therapy. The trial may lead to further functional recovery in people with stroke, and lessen the ongoing burden of stroke on patients and their families.

Graduate student Amelia van Slooten received a prestigious Miller Postgraduate Scholarship to continue her studies, worth \$84,000. Her work aims to find out if a new peptide therapy can reduce inflammation in the brain following stroke, thereby allowing new brain cells to replace the damaged area.

A new perspective on the causes of depression will be investigated by Associate Professor Bronwen Connor and Dr Alisa McGregor in the School of Medical Sciences. The team will research the effects of chronic stress and how changes in the brain could relate to the onset of depression.

MS research and stem cell therapies were also boosted with more funding.

All told the Neurological Foundation of New Zealand awarded more than \$1 million in research grants, travel grants and scholarships in its December 2009 funding round. Tertiary institutions throughout the country were recipients, with in addition to the successful grant applications from The University of Auckland, the University of Otago, Victoria University, the University of Canterbury and Lincoln University all having successful applications.

For further information:

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For more information on the grants, please see: www.neurological.org.nz