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Linking Head Trauma and A.L.S. in Military

By **ALAN SCHWARZ**

Researchers at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Bedford, Mass., and the [Boston University School of Medicine](#) said the link between [head trauma](#) and symptoms that resemble [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis](#) may explain why [A.L.S.](#) has been diagnosed in military veterans at high rates.

The doctors said that the link between head trauma and an A.L.S.-like disease suggests that the heightened risk would apply not just to collision-sport athletes, but soldiers who sustain [concussions](#) and blast injuries.

"I'm fascinated by this," said Jim McCaffrey, 65, who served with the [United States Navy](#) during the Vietnam War and was told by doctors he had A.L.S. two years ago. He sustained a serious concussion during his service and several others later playing adult sports; now living in Chatham, Mass., he has lost the use of all four limbs.

"Wouldn't it be fascinating if I didn't have A.L.S. in the end?" McCaffrey asked, adding that he hoped that science could progress quickly enough to help soldiers now returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. "All these kids coming back with problems. Talk about a petri dish."

Several studies have identified members of the United States military — particularly combat soldiers — at heightened risk for A.L.S., which is considered related to service in the determination of veterans' benefits.

Dr. James Kelly, the director of the National [Intrepid](#) Center of Excellence in Bethesda, Md., which studies brain injuries and psychological health conditions in active soldiers, said that the paper would open new avenues of scientific focus and research.

"My organization is going to have to become very familiar with the clinical presentations of these conditions in soldiers and [Marines](#) and be mindful of this type of literature as there are new advances," Dr. Kelly said. "We will no doubt encounter this in small numbers of individuals. It will broaden our scope to consider these individuals in what may be a mixed picture." **ALAN SCHWARZ**

