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AFL considers stem cell technology treatment for injured players
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ELEANOR HALL: When a football star is injured, their club will look at every possible treatment to get them back on the field as quickly as possible.

Soon that could include using the player's own stem cells to help speed their recovery.

As Georgia Spokes reports, several AFL clubs have been showing a keen interest in the new technology.

GEORGIA SPOKES: Two years ago Richmond forward Nathan Brown suffered one of the worst injuries seen in an AFL telecast.

TELEVISION COMMENTATOR: Nathan Brown, the smother was it? Oh no, Oh no. That's a snap. That's not good at all.

GEORGIA SPOKES: Brown broke both bones in his lower leg and endured a long, painful and frustrating recovery.

Melbourne-based Professor Silviu Itescu believes that his treatment could have sped up that process.

SILVIU ITESCU: The cells are clearly safe, no side effects and more importantly in the first five patients that have completed the trial to date, we've seen complete bone repair and union of fractures that otherwise were not healing.

GEORGIA SPOKES: The treatment has been developed over 10 years. Cells are taken from the patient's own bone marrow and injected into the injury.

Silviu Itescu says several football clubs from all codes are now considering using the treatment.

SILVIU ITESCU: There has been interest by some of the professional football clubs potentially as an insurance policy for players, where we can access their cells, grow them up and then bank them and have them available, if and when they undergo a severe injury of some sort like the high impact injury of either bone or tendon or cartilage.

GEORGIA SPOKES: But such insurance policies come at a cost. Peter Brukner is an

Associate Professor in Sports Medicine at the University of Melbourne.

PETER BRUKNER: One of these treatments costs something in the region of \$20,000. That seems like an awful lot of money but if it you know prevents a player missing a number of weeks of football then it becomes economically viable, so you would imagine that the more financially wealthy clubs would look at that and see it as a cost benefit.

GEORGIA SPOKES: Already this season, AFL clubs have spent big money on all sorts of remedies. Perhaps the strangest was when Geelong defender, Max Rooke, went to Germany, where his hamstring was injected with calves' blood and honey. It seemed to work though. Rooke is likely to return to the field this weekend.

Peter Brukner believes clubs will be just as eager to try the stem cell treatment.

PETER BRUKNER: I can see it happening as early as next year, if the club for instance had a fracture that wasn't healing well or they had concern with or someone had a damage to the lining of their joint and was making it difficult for them to play. I would imagine that clubs would give serious consideration to using this technology as soon as next year.

GEORGIA SPOKES: Professor Silviu Itescu is confident the technology will be given the tick of approval by the leagues themselves.

SILVIU ITESCU: We work hand in hand with the Australian regulatory bodies and I think that makes the type of relationship that we would have with the sporting folks much smoother.

GEORGIA SPOKES: And down the track, he hopes the treatment will be much easier to access and more widely available.

SILVIU ITESCU: We could potentially develop and off the shelf kind of a drug type, a therapeutic product which would be much cheaper, which would be available generally to the broad segment of the population rather than just elite sportsmen.

ELEANOR HALL: Melbourne University Professor, Silviu Itescu, ending that report from Georgia Spokes.

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