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Cell trials on spine injuries
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Author: ROBYN RILEY

VICTORIANS with severe spinal cord injuries may become part of an international clinical trials to confirm embryonic stem cells can help them walk again.

Leading neurobiologist Professor Hans Keirstead, in Australia this week for an international stem cell conference, is set to start clinical trials in the US using embryonic stem cells to treat acute paralysis.

The cells are extracted from a fertilised human egg that can grow into any type of cell in the body.

Prof Keirstead, who heads a team at the Christopher Reeve-Irvine Research Centre in California, has proved the therapy works in rats.

Patients must be treated within 14 days of an injury because the spinal cord must still be inflamed to allow the ESC to rebuild myelin, an insulation for nerve fibres.

Joanna Knott, the convenor of the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research Australia, said this did not mean there was no hope for people who had been wheelchair-bound for some time.

“This trial is a first step,” said Ms Knott, who was paralysed 15 years ago in a skiing accident.

“Every day there is still hope.”

Ms Knott said Australians would be invited to join the next stage of the trial.

“It is time to get excited,” she said. “This is the first time ESC have been tested in humans and this is a very high calibre clinical trial.”

California Institute of Regenerative Medicine chairman Robert Klein agreed.

Mr Klein, who is in Melbourne to give the prestigious Alfred Deakin Innovation Lecture tomorrow night, said Prof Keirstead had proved the concept that ESC could repair damaged spinal cords in rats.

At the free public lecture tomorrow night, Mr Klein will also talk to Victorians about

why stem cell research is essential.

Mr Klein said he was passionate about the potential of stem cells and that it was personal.

His mother is dying from Alzheimer's disease and his son, Jordan, 17, suffers type 1 diabetes.

Mr Klein's free lecture will be at BMW Edge in Federation Square tomorrow at 6pm. It is part of the 2007 Alfred Deakin Innovation Lectures.

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