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Horse Racing: 'Stem-cell therapy for tendon injuries works'

Published: 10/11/2006 (Sport) Howard Wright

STEM-CELL therapy for tendon injury in racehorses works - but conclusive proof of its efficacy is still some way off, the man behind the pioneering technique told delegates at Cheltenham yesterday, writes Howard Wright.

Roger Smith, of the Royal Veterinary College, explained how an initial safety trial on six cases, treating tendons with stem cells taken from the horse's bone marrow, had been translated into work with more than 300 horses in the UK and Europe.

The latest figures for racehorses returned to full training for at least a year show that, overall, 22 per cent suffered a recurrence of the tendon injury. The proportion among jumpers was 18 per cent.

Smith revealed that this compared with a re-injury rate of around 57 per cent among a similar group of horses treated with alternative methods and quoted in research published by Sue Dyson in 2004, although over a longer period of training.

Smith explained: "The action of the stem cell once within the tissue has not been fully clarified. It appears that it can either become a tendon cell and make new tendon tissue, or act by inducing the cells already within the tendon to make tendon tissue."

Smith said that bone marrow was collected from the sternum in the standing horse, and that since the animal receives its own cells and fluid, there were no problems of rejection.

He added: "It's interesting to note that the average interval between injury and implantation for those cases that did not re-injure was 44 days, but 83 days for those who did re-injure."

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