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UCLA Brain Injury Expert Receives “Strength of the Nation Award” from U.S. Army

David Hovda cited for his contributions to caring for the nation’s wounded warriors

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David Hovda, a UCLA professor of neurosurgery and of molecular and medical pharmacology; and director of the UCLA Brain Injury Research Center, has been selected by the U.S. Army as the recipient of the 2011 Strength of the Nation Award for his extraordinary contributions to caring for the nation’s wounded warriors. The Strength of the Nation Award is presented to an individual who engages in exemplary public service that makes a substantial contribution in completing the Army’s mission.

Hovda was cited for his breakthrough research that led to a system for diagnosis and recovery of traumatic brain injury on the battlefield. On June 15, he will receive the award at a special VIP reception prior to the Army Birthday Twilight Tattoo Parade at historic Fort Lesley J. McNair, in Washington D.C.

Hovda’s visionary efforts have helped hundreds of military men and women at war receive treatment for mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), that are mainly caused by Improvised Explosive Devices, or IEDs, said military officials. If not treated, this traumatizing injury can lead to brain damage and mental health problems including post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

“I’m very proud to receive this honor,” Hovda said. “I feel it’s my duty to do something for my country, especially knowing the beneficiaries are the warriors who devote their lives to protect this nation.”

The Army noted that by combining neuroscience research with psychiatric treatment in the care of the nation’s Wounded Warriors, Hovda has created a model for other institutions to follow in the treatment of cerebral concussions.

Hovda, who also brought awareness to the NFL in the 1990s about the effects of multiple concussions to players on the football field, was instrumental in alerting the Department of Defense to the setbacks soldiers can suffer from repeated blows to the head and injury to the

brain after an IED explosion on the battlefield. In 2008 and again in 2010, he assembled and led the Blue Ribbon Symposium, a panel of experts that advised the Vice Chiefs of Staff for both the US Army and the US Marine Corp on establishing frontline medical installations designed to treat potential TBI injuries. The installations are equipped with medically trained personnel to diagnose soldiers exposed to IED blasts and possibly TBI; MRI scanners for testing have been approved for deployment; and revised protocols for evaluating brain injuries have been established, including 24-hour (or longer) timeout rooms that remove military personnel from the warzone after exposure to a blast. Through Hovda's efforts in raising the awareness of cerebral concussions, the military has now established this protocol to help minimize permanent brain dysfunction. Ultimately, his research and efforts will improve the lives and mental health of our returning service members.

Hovda, who has devoted most of his career to understanding the mechanisms of recovery of brain function, was also a key figure in establishing the National Intrepid Center of Excellence in Bethesda, MD, a medical facility built with private funds for military service men and women with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and mental health issues.

His efforts to understand and treat TBI have now become part of Operation Mend, a unique partnership between Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, and the V.A.-Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, to help treat U.S. military personnel severely wounded during service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hovda is the second member of the UCLA family to receive the award. In 2010, philanthropist Ronald A. Katz, who founded Operation Mend, received the Strength of the Nation Award.

The UCLA Brain Injury Research Center, part of the Department of Neurosurgery, maintains a comprehensive basic and clinical scientific program in the field of traumatic brain injury. Its scientists conduct research into imaging, neurophysiology, molecular biology, modeling, and behavioral neuroscience in order to apply this knowledge toward understanding the neurobiology of human TBI.

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