

DAILY NEWS LOS ANGELES

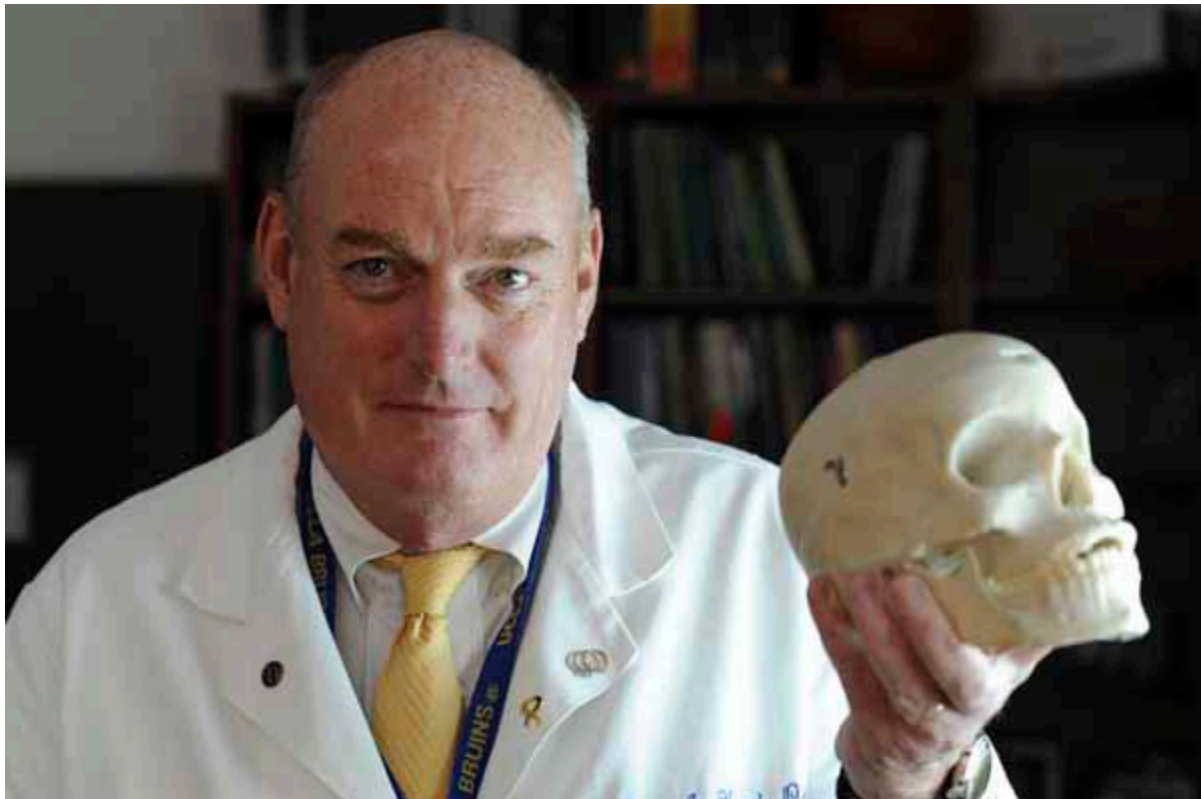
MIND MENDER

UCLA neuroscientist to be honored for efforts to save troops, others from harm

By [Dana Bartholomew](#), Staff Writer

Posted: 06/03/2011 09:47:39 PM PDT

Updated: 06/03/2011 09:54:18 PM PDT



Dr. David Hovda, Professor and Vice Chairman of Research Affairs and Director of UCLA Brain Injury Research Center, will be the recipient of the fifth U.S. Army Strength of the Nation Award. (Hans Gutknecht/LA Daily News)

For centuries, American warriors rattled by a shell or bomb charged back into battle - risking permanent brain damage from another concussion.

No more, thanks to a Woodland Hills neuroscientist at UCLA, whose research on traumatic brain injury has saved the minds of legions of athletes and military service members.

For his dedication, David Hovda this month will receive the Strength of the Nation Award, the Army's highest civilian honor.

"We love him," said Lt. Col. Steve Warren, a spokesman for Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, who is vice chief of staff of the Army and one of the military's leading advocates for brain injury victims. "Traumatic brain injury has emerged as one of the most significant wounds of the war."

"What he's done is make extraordinary contributions by introducing the Army to breakthrough research into systematic recovery from brain trauma."

It took a century to develop the modern military helmet, which can help protect soldiers from gunfire and flying shrapnel.

What it can't do is protect against the concussive impact of an improvised explosive device.

Of the 1.6 million U.S. servicemen to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003, far too many were sustaining traumatic brain injuries, including 31,000 last year, according to the Defense and

Veterans Brain Injury Center.

If the brain is jarred too violently - whether on the battlefield or the ball field - an energy crisis can occur inside the skull, Hovda said.

A chemical reaction in the brain creates symptoms of a concussion - headache, slowed judgment and lethargy. It also makes the brain vulnerable to further injury.

Another knock to the head increases the chance of other mental problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, clinical depression and anxiety.

"If (the warrior) goes back into battle, and gets another concussion before he recovers from the first one, he's got a greater chance of getting Alzheimer's, Parkinson's or other neurological disorder," said Hovda, director of the UCLA Brain Injury Research Center at the David Geffen School of Medicine.

"My effort was to convince the military that you could diagnose this - you could see concussion."

Hovda, a native of Wisconsin, has devoted his life to studying brain injury and recovery.

While working at a children's psychiatric hospital in New Mexico, he grew interested in why some kids grew up with mental illness - "and why you couldn't open the skull like the hood of a car to fix the wiring."

Later, he would be a champion for professional athletes, helping set up protocols to protect them from brain injuries.

It was in 2008 that he assembled a blue-ribbon panel to recommend the military set up front-line bases to diagnose warriors exposed to IED blasts.

Anyone with a concussion must now stay "inside the wire" until the symptoms of his injury abate, preventing thousands of further cerebral wounds.

His slide show on concussions is now shown to every soldier and Marine.

"I do NFL. I do boxers. I help NHL players. And warriors," said Hovda, who turns 58 on Monday.

What they all have in common, he said, is that they lie after suffering a concussion - "I'm ready to go back in. I want to fight."

Around his office perch NFL football helmets, an NBA basketball, a professional baseball, a Top Gun hat and a whole line of thinking caps sans lids. On his desk sits a primer, "Brain Facts."

On June 15, the 6-foot-2 hulking former high school middle linebacker and college golf pro will attend the U.S. Army's Birthday Twilight Tattoo Parade at Fort Meyer, in Arlington, Va., in honor of the service's 236 anniversary.

And at precisely 18:44 p.m. military time, Secretary of the Army John McHugh will present him with the Strength of the Nation honors.

"My mission is to cure traumatic brain injury," said Hovda, founder of the research center containing 24 research physicians, 10 medical students and staff. "I am very proud and honored to be recognized.

"But this was my duty and obligation as a citizen."

As such, Hovda is the second Angeleno to receive the public-service award.

Last year, Los Angeles philanthropist Ronald Katz received the Army's third such medal set for founding "Operation Mend," which provides reconstructive surgery to warriors badly disfigured by explosive devices.

"Two in a row. Two out of four, 50 percent of all the Strength of the Nation Awards have gone to L.A.," said Warren, the Army spokesman.

"Los Angeles is one of America's greatest cities."