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COMMENT

Can Tories win us over?

THE Conservative Party clearly think it can make inroads in the North-East during the forthcoming General Election, and the political climate is undoubtedly in its favour.

The North-East voted heavily for Brexit in the recent referendum, and judging by the comments on our letters page and website in the past few months, plenty of long-term Labour voters are growing increasingly disillusioned with a party that has spent the past 12 months tearing itself apart.

But if Theresa May thinks that merely throwing her weight behind the terms of a "Hard Brexit" will be sufficient to guarantee thousands of new North-East votes, she risks underestimating the political intelligence of the voters she is hoping to court.

Yes, June's election will be shaped by the fallout from the decision to leave the EU, but the pros and cons of Brexit are merely part of the debate and the Conservatives cannot afford to ignore the many pertinent questions that will affect the North-East's future, but which are not directly affected by the issue of Europe.

How would a future Tory government address the growing North-South divide and provide growth and prosperity in the North-East? What is the future of the Northern Powerhouse, a concept that has long appeared better on paper than has been the case in practice? And will the Conservatives' plans for infrastructure investment stretch to the North-East, or will their view of the North continue to be dominated by the economic strength of Manchester and Leeds?

These are just some of the issues that will help determine whether the Conservatives can make genuine inroads into a region that has spent more than two decades shunning them.

With Labour in turmoil, the North-East is ready to at least listen to the Tories. Is Mrs May's party prepared to speak openly about its plans?

 **What do you think?**
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Parkinson's: A cure in sight?



TESTS: Experiments on the brains of laboratory mice had promising results, bringing the prospect of a cure for Parkinson's disease a step closer

THE recent announcement of a potential breakthrough and a new step towards a cure for Parkinson's disease will come as wonderful and exciting news to those affected worldwide.

Scientists working at centres in America, Spain and Sweden have managed to genetically modify native cells in the brains of mice to produce the chemical dopamine, deficiency of which is responsible for the symptoms and signs associated with the disease.

In the laboratory, test mice had Parkinson's disease artificially induced by the destruction of their own dopamine producing nerve cells. Thereafter, the scientists were able to reprogramme other non-dopamine producing cells in the mice's brain to start making dopamine. They found that the animals' motor control improved within only five weeks, compared to control mice.

Even more promisingly, the experts managed to replicate this with human nerve cells, albeit in test tubes. Due to safety aspects, it still may be some time before live human trials are approved.

Parkinson's disease is defined as a progressive neurological disease. There is unfortunately no cure at the present time. Nerve cells in the brain, responsible for the production of the chemical transmitter dopamine, start to malfunction and eventually die. Dopamine is vital for smooth and controlled movement and coordination. Naturally, loss of dopamine results in deterioration in these functions.

Shakes and reduced or slow movements are the hallmarks of Parkinson's disease. Sufferers may develop a "pill-rolling tremor", whereby the thumb involuntarily and repetitively rubs against the index and middle finger as if a pill were between them. At the same time, individuals may struggle to initiate movement. Typically, this results in a slow shuffling gait, often with falls.

As the facial muscles become involved, the person becomes unable to form expressions appropriate to the situation, developing a so called "mask-like" face. Parkinson's disease affects muscles throughout the body, and can



With part of April dedicated to greater awareness and understanding of Parkinson's disease, **Dr Zak Uddin** looks at research which may be the start of a cure for this debilitating illness

result in problems with swallowing, issues with bladder control and even loss of smell. Anxiety and depression are associated with the illness, as is dementia, and can sometimes be the initial symptoms, with Parkinson's disease overlooked as a diagnosis until disorders of movement appear.

CURRENTLY there are one in five hundred people in the UK with a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, which is approximately 130,000 individuals nationwide. Typically the onset of symptoms is after the age of 50, but early onset Parkinson's disease is a recognised phenomenon. One of the most famous persons to develop this is the Canadian-born actor Michael J Fox, who was diagnosed with the disease at the age of 29, yet has done much to raise the profile of the illness and help sufferers with his positivity.

Specialist input is required to make a diagnosis, usually by a neurologist with further expertise in Parkinson's disease itself. It relies on a combination of physical examination and the results of brain imaging. In addition, if the person's symptoms improve with the administration of the drug levodopa, which is converted in the body to dopamine, a diagnosis can be made.

Often, being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease can have a devastating effect on an individual's psychological wellbeing. Thankfully Parkinson's specialist nurses are avail-

able to provide support at all stages.

Current treatments, although not offering a cure, aim to prolong independent function and dignity for as long as possible. The mainstay is drug treatment, using medicines which are precursors of dopamine and are converted to the active chemical in the body, or alternatively preparations which reduce the breakdown of dopamine by the brain, hence increasing the amount of the active transmitter available. Deep Brain Stimulation is a surgical approach, only offered in super specialist centres and suitable for some but not all patients.

It involves implanting wires into specific areas of the brain with the aim of altering some of the signals in the brain responsible for the symptoms of Parkinson's.

Although there is much to recommend a healthy lifestyle, there appears to be no modifiable behaviours to actually prevent the development of the disease itself. Expert advice is that if you or anyone you know develops features that may be associated with Parkinson's, they access medical advice as soon as possible.

Current NHS targets aim to have anyone with a suspected diagnosis assessed by a specialist able to make a formal diagnosis in six weeks. If a diagnosis is made, then much can still be done to help, support and maintain quality of life for those affected, as well as their loved ones.

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