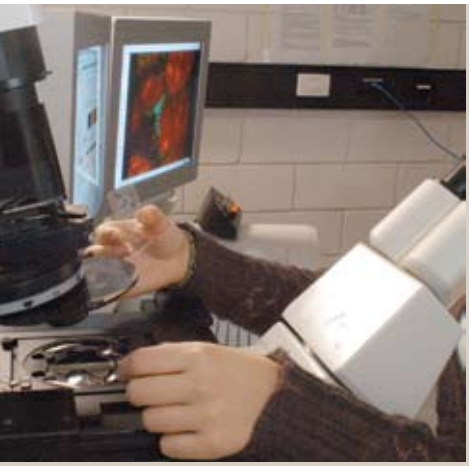
EATING CHOCOLATE MAY HELP YOU AVOID DEMENTIA:
RESEARCH LOOKS AT THE ROLE OF COPPER IN ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE



Munching on nuts and indulging in dark chocolate could become part of the fight against the most common form of dementia.

These foods are rich in copper, which is known to be essential for human health and development.

It is also thought to play a role in neurological diseases including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and motor neurone disease.

Deakin University scientists are examining how copper influences Alzheimer's disease in the hope of identifying possible treatments.

Alzheimer's is characterised by protein deposits in the brain called amyloid plaques, which contain high levels of copper and zinc.

Professor Julian Mercer and Dr Sharon La Fontaine from the School of Life and Environmental Sciences are investigating whether these plaques may be sucking copper out of cells.

They are trying to determine if this copper deficiency in the brain could be causing some of the cell death that occurs with Alzheimer's.

If proven, it opens up the prospect that a simple way reduce the risk of Alzheimer's is to increase the amount of copper in their diet.

"If people all through their life have a bit more copper, maybe it will slow down the onset," says Julian. "If you can slow that down then you might die before you get the disease."

To test the hypothesis, the researchers will study how mice with Alzheimer's respond to increased levels of copper, as well as a copper-deficient diet.

Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia, accounting for up to 70 per cent of all cases. The number of Australians affected is expected to soar as the population ages in the coming decades.

Copper is critical for human health as it is needed in the mitochondria, the cell "powerhouses" that produce the energy for cells to function. But it is estimated the average diet provides only about half the amount of copper we need for optimum health.

FURTHER INFORMATION:
Julian Mercer, Alfred Deakin Professor,
Director, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology,
School of Life and Environmental Sciences
E: julian.mercer@deakin.edu.au
www.deakin.edu.au/scitech/les/research/rpa/cmb/ccmb/areas/index.php