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Boston Healthcare System

News Release

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Researchers recommend including interpersonal violence in traumatic brain injury screening

BOSTON – Researchers at VA Boston, Harvard Medical School, and Boston University Chobanian & Avedisian School of Medicine recommended expanding traumatic brain injury screening among women Veterans to include interpersonal violence in a paper published Aug. 14, 2024, in the journal Brain Sciences.

“Women Veterans often experience traumatic brain injury from causes unrelated to deployment, but current TBI screening focuses on deployment,” said Dr. Michelle Pebole, lead author of the study, and research fellow at the Translational Research Center for TBI and Stress Disorders, known as TRACTS, at VA Boston Healthcare System, and the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “Improving the effectiveness of TBI screening tools for women Veterans is critical, given the physical and mental health disparities they face because of these injuries.”

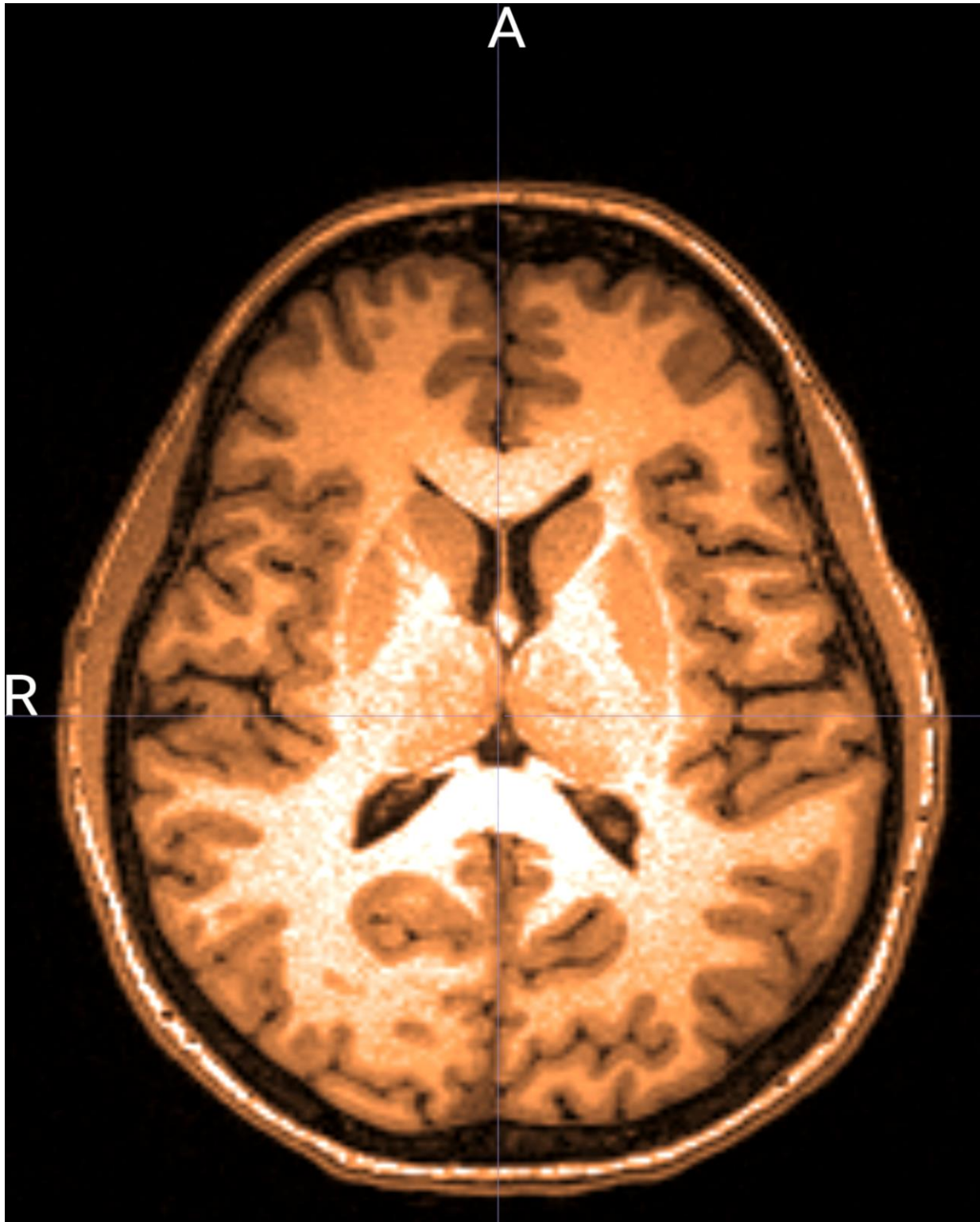
The study examined the utility of the current Veterans Health Administration, or VHA, TBI screening tool for women Veterans, comparing it to a comprehensive TBI assessment, the Boston Assessment for TBI-Lifetime, known as the BAT-L. Ninety women Veterans were included in the study. Overall, the BAT-L identified 27 non-deployment TBIs not captured by the VHA screen, most frequently resulting from physical assault.

The study findings suggest that screening for lifetime TBIs from a variety of origins – including partner violence, military sexual trauma and accidents – instead of exclusively focusing on deployment-related TBIs would benefit women Veterans. The study also found an under-identification of TBIs in clinical care, which suggests that more liberal screening and referrals for comprehensive TBI assessments in polytrauma clinics, women Veteran-specific care clinics, or research settings may improve care for women Veterans.

“Future work with larger samples of both Veteran and civilian women is needed, and could also address intersectional issues in TBI, such as race, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status,” noted Pebole. “This could help us understand the utility of screening tools for detecting TBIs among all women.”

The research is available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-3425/14/8/814>

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Magnetic resonance imaging of a brain. Diagnostic imagery like this can be used to look for changes in structure from traumatic brain injuries. (MRI imagery courtesy of VA Boston HCS)

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