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March 17, 2003

Brain scan shows how to spot a bright spark

By MARK HENDERSON, SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT

INTELLIGENCE tests of the future could involve a brain scan rather than endless questions after the discovery that clever people really are "brighter" than the rest of us.

Scientists have identified "bright spots" in the brain, which clever people use more efficiently to solve problems. And there is a chance that we could all improve our intellect simply by learning to concentrate more, since the bright spots are generally in areas controlling attention.

The discovery by researchers from Washington University in St Louis and Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, goes some way to explaining why some people are more intelligent than others — although they acknowledge other factors such as heredity, diet and education.

Forty-eight volunteers who took part in the study took tests measuring general fluid intelligence (gF) — a reasoning and problem-solving ability similar to IQ.

The volunteers' brains were then scanned while they tackled a complex problem, looking at cards bearing a series of faces and being asked to spot a face that had appeared three places back in the sequence. Other cards featuring faces two or four places back were added to confuse them.

The research team, led by Jeremy Gray of Washington University, report in *Nature Neuroscience* that they found a remarkable correlation between high gF scores, good test results and a distinctive pattern of brain stimulation. Certain structures, particularly in the pre-frontal cortex, showed much greater activity in those who performed well.

Dr Gray said: "Behavioural interventions such as schooling and other factors can have markedly positive influences on gF. A mechanistic understanding could lead to more specific approaches to enhancing it."

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