

Brady's brain injuries likely to hinder his activities

By Tim Richard
staff writer

If presidential press secretary James Brady survives, his powers of speech are likely to be preserved.

But the 40-year-old Brady may have trouble finding his way around and dressing himself — in other words, with visual-spatial relationships.

Without attempting to diagnose the injuries which a would-be assassin's bullet did to Brady Monday, two Wayne State University psychologists explained the different kinds of dysfunctions which could result from different types of brain injuries.

News reports from Washington said a .22 cal. bullet entered Brady's forehead and penetrated the right side of his brain.

"ONE CAN predict there will be left-side motor problems, but the speech areas of the brain were

preserved," said Dr. R. Douglas Whitman, associate professor of psychology.

"If the bullet passed through his right visual cortex, there will be visual-spatial dysfunctions on the left side. He may have difficulty orienting himself and dressing."

"The damage was called 'extensive' (in news reports). I don't know what that means," said Whitman.

Although Brady's injury is very serious, there is hope. "If you visit a rehabilitation unit, you'll find some amazing recoveries. Brain tissue itself doesn't regenerate, but brain functions will. If the brain can do the task with different tissues, it will do it."

Whitman, who teaches advanced courses in clinical neuropsychology, said wounded veterans of the Korean War (1950-53) have been studied for more than 20 years. "Some have shown progressive recovery," he said.

"THE HUMAN brain is an extremely complex organism, and some human functions are dependent on more than one part of the brain," said Dr. Douglas Shore.

"A person could have brain damage that disabled his muscles. His speech would be slurred, but the intellectual part would be intact," said Shore, who is in the psychology department of the WSU School of Medicine's rehabilitation unit.

"On the other hand, the motoric part could be intact, but the person could speak gibberish" if the intellectual part of the brain were damaged, he said.

A major question will be how much damage the bullet did to Brady's brain.

"A bullet may circle around in the skull and do a lot of damage," said Shore, although news reports Tuesday indicated the bullet traveled a direct route with little loss of brain fluids.

"When swelling from the wound goes down, brain functions may return," Shore said. "There

are many explanations of why functions return. Even an injured brain may be capable of re-learning a function."

WHEN THE rehabilitation institute treats a brain-damaged person and there is improvement, he said, it's uncertain whether the improvement was due to the healing effects of time or to the training.

In general, the right hemisphere of the brain, where Brady was shot, has little to do with speech functions. Nevertheless, the right hemisphere is important.


"It contains visual-spatial skills. A person with right hemisphere injury may have difficulty finding his way around city streets or hospital corridors. He looks at a clock without numbers and can't read it."

"A person with right hemisphere injuries may ignore left side space. If he's in a wheelchair, he may bang into the left side of a door. He'll roll back and bang it again."

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— Dr. R. Douglas Whitman
WSU professor

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