

Near Proof for Near-Death?

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The 44-year-old man who had collapsed in a meadow was brought to a hospital, unconscious and with no pulse or brain activity. Doctors began artificial respiration, heart massage and defibrillation.

A nurse trying to feed a tube down the man's throat saw that he was wearing dentures. The nurse removed them and placed them on a stand called a "crash car." The patient was moved to the intensive care unit.

A week later, after the patient had recovered, the nurse saw the man again. The man immediately recognized the nurse as the person who had removed his dentures and also remembered other details of what had happened while he was in a deep coma. He said he had perceived the events from above the hospital bed and watched doctors' efforts to save his life.

This account would be standard fare in a supermarket tabloid, but last week it was published in the *Lancet*, a British medical journal. It is the latest in a long series of efforts to either document or debunk the existence of "near-death" experiences, something that for the most part has remained in the realm of the paranormal.

The new study, conducted in the Netherlands, is one of the first so-called prospective scientific studies. Instead of interviewing people who reported near-death experiences after the fact, the researchers simply followed hundreds of patients who were resuscitated after suffering clinical death as their hearts stopped. The idea was that this approach might provide more accurate accounts by documenting the experiences as they happened, rather than basing them on recollections of the distant past.

About 18 percent of the patients in the study reported some recollection of the period when they were clinically dead, and 8 percent to 12 percent reported going through "near-death" experiences, such as seeing lights at the end of tunnels or "crossing over" and speaking with dead relatives and friends.

The researchers say the evidence supports the validity of "near-death" experiences and suggests that scientists should rethink theories on one of the ultimate medical mysteries: the nature of human consciousness.

Skeptics, however, maintain that the Dutch researchers had not provided evidence to buttress any extraordinary claims; certainly nothing as dramatic as proof that there is an afterlife.

Most neuroscientists believe that consciousness is a byproduct of the physical brain, that mind arises from matter. But if near-death experiences are really what those who experience them say they are, does that mean that people can be conscious of events around them even when they are physically unconscious, when their brains do not show signs of electrical activity?

How can consciousness be independent of brain function?

"Compare it with a TV" program, said Pim van Lommel, a cardiologist at the Hospital Rijnstate in the Netherlands and the lead investigator of the research. "If you open the TV set you will not find the program. The TV set is a receiver. When you turn off your TV set, the program is still there but you can't see it. When you put off your brain, your consciousness is there but you can't feel it in your body."

The study, he said in a telephone interview, suggested that researchers investigating consciousness "should not look in the cells and molecules alone."

Although the Dutch scientist said the research did not address whether there was such a thing as the soul or God or the afterlife, many remained skeptical. In an accompanying article, Christopher French, director of the Anomalistic Psychology Research unit at Britain's Goldsmiths College, said that multiple questions persisted.

"We have understandable and natural urges to believe we will survive bodily death and we will be reunited with our departed loved ones," he said. "So anything that would support that idea -- reincarnation, mediums, ghosts -- present evidence of the survival of the soul. It's something that we would all desperately like to believe is true."

French pointed out that some of those in the study who reported they had near-death experiences said in follow-up interviews that

they had not had them, while a few who had said they had experienced nothing later said they now remembered them. He said that this could suggest that false memories were at play.

"I don't think the study suggests anything beyond the dying process," agreed Paul Kurtz, a former professor of philosophy at the State University of New York in Buffalo and the chairman for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

"The out-of-body experience and light and traveling down a tunnel and meeting people on the other side -- in my view these are the psychological states that people go through as they are dying," he said.

Both pointed out that hearing is the last sense to shut down in the dying brain and that victims such as the 44-year-old man may have heard some of the events around them and subconsciously reconstructed the events as visual.

The Dutch researchers tracked 344 patients who had been resuscitated. They ranged in age from 26 to 92. Three-quarters were men. Most were interviewed within five days of being resuscitated, and the researchers followed up with interviews two and eight years later to test the reliability of the patients' memories.

Patients' demographics, religious beliefs, psychological makeup and medical treatment were also documented to see who was more likely to report such experiences.

The researchers found that the experiences did not correlate with any of the measured psychological, physiological or medical parameters, which Lommel said meant the experiences were unrelated to processes in the dying brain. Most patients had excellent recall of the events, he added, which undermined the theory that the memories were false.

Finally, the people who had such experiences reported marked changes in their personalities, compared with those who had come near death but not had the experiences. They seemed to lose fear of death, and they became more compassionate, altruistic and loving.

Bruce Greyson, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville who has also done research in the area, said that science had neither good explanations nor good rebuttals of the conclusions of the Dutch researchers.

In experiments underway, he said, tiny signs were placed on the ceilings of hospital rooms, so that if people were genuinely having out-of-body experiences and hovering over their beds, they would be able to see the signs and provide "proof" of the phenomenon.

While it may take a long time for such experiments to uncover a case, he and others said, because not all patients will be resuscitated in that room and not all cardiac arrest cases result in near-death experiences, it could provide evidence to buttress patients' reports.

"Brain chemistry does not explain these phenomena," Greyson said. "I don't know what the explanation is, but our current understanding of brain chemistry falls short."

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