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Lancet Medical Journal Publishes Near-Death Study of Cardiac Arrest Survivors

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December 29, 2001 Arnhem, The Netherlands - The December 15th issue of *The Lancet* medical journal published results of a ten year study, "Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest." In the report, near-death experiences are defined as "the reported memory of all impressions during a special state of consciousness, including specific elements such as out-of-body experience, pleasant feelings and seeing a tunnel, a light, a being of light, deceased relatives, or a life review."

The authors are Dutch cardiologists lead by Dr. Pim van Lommel in the Division of Cardiology at the Hospital Rijnstate in Arnhem, The Netherlands. Dr. van Lommel has been a cardiologist for twenty-five years. He and his colleagues began their article with this statement: "Some people report a near-death experience known as an NDE after a life-threatening crisis. We aimed to establish the cause of this experience and assess factors that affected its frequency, depth and content."

For twelve years Dr. von Lommel and his team studied 344 patients who had cardiac arrests and were successfully resuscitated in ten Dutch hospitals. Of those 344, eighteen percent reported a near-death experience. The researchers concluded: "Occurrence of the experience was not associated with duration of cardiac arrest or unconsciousness, medication or fear of death before cardiac arrest," they wrote. Significantly more patients who had an NDE, especially a deep experience, died within 30 days of CPR, perhaps because those people were not afraid to let go of life after their near-death experiences.

Further, in a surprisingly firm conclusion, the doctors concluded: "Our results show that medical factors cannot account for occurrence of NDE; although all patients had been clinically dead, most did not have NDE. Furthermore, seriousness of the crisis was not related to occurrence or depth of the experience. If purely physiological factors resulting from cerebral anoxia caused NDE, most of our patients should have had this experience. Patients' medication was also unrelated to frequency of NDE."

One of the most extraordinary cases studied was a 43-year-old man who had cardiac arrest on a street. Dr. van Lommel explains what happened.

Interview:

Pim van Lommel, M. D., Cardiologist, Division of Cardiology, Hospital Rijnstate, Arnhem, Netherlands: "It was a 43-year-old man who had an out-of-hospital (cardiac) arrest and so when he was admitted to the hospital, they had been doing CPR for more than half an hour. So he was deeply unconscious and cyanotic when he was admitted to the hospital. He was in very bad shape. He had no blood pressure, no heartbeat, and so they were performing CPR. And after 1.5 hours in the hospital at last he had blood pressure and heart beat, but there was brain damage. So, there was no spontaneous respiration.

So they had to intubate him and when the nurse intubated him, he had to remove the dental prosthesis and put it on the crash car. The patient had to be on artificial respiration for more than one week in ICU and then he came back to the cardiac ward. The first time the nurse entered his room to give him medication, the patient recognized the nurse and said, 'Oh, you was the one who was there when I was admitted in the hospital and you took out my dentures, the dental prosthesis, to intubate me.'

He could describe exactly what doctors were there, how they looked like, what the room looked like. And the nurse was so upset because he had never heard of an NDE before. So, he rang us. We explained to him and we asked him to write down everything that had happened.

What is doing the perceiving since it is not a conscious brain, eye and ear system?

Exactly, exactly. That means when there is no activity in the brain, let's say a flat EEG, and people can still have their full consciousness with cognition, emotion, with memories from their youth, all for the possibility of perceiving. That means there must be something that can be received by your brain, so it is something outside your body that you can receive in your body by your brain.

Do you think that is indirect proof of a soul-spirit?

No, I never use the word because everybody has their own ideas about it. So I never use the word mind, soul or spirit because I think it's very hard to know what someone else means. So I talk about consciousness and memories and self-identity.

What you are saying is that the concept of soul and spirit becomes political because of different religious interpretations of them?

Exactly. Exactly. Everybody has his own ideas and no one knows what anyone else thinks about it.

Yet, something is perceiving the details of a room, people and those false teeth. What is doing the perceiving?

It is your consciousness with your identity and with your memories. And you can give it a name, but I won't. You can call it mind or soul, but I won't because somebody else thinks perhaps something different.

What you are saying is that your bottom line from doing this research is that you have at least reported in 18% of the cases of the 344 cardiac patients that you studied have some kind of recollection of something happening after they were clinically dead for a few minutes?

There have always been theories about NDE reports - that they are just a physiological reaction of anoxia of the brain, lack of oxygen. Or it was some chemical reaction of endomorphines or it is a psychological reaction to death, or it is medication. So, what we did in this first prospective study was to look if there could be any explanation of having NDE. We looked at two groups of patients: 18% who did report some form of memory and 82% who didn't. There is no difference in medical, psychological, physiological or pharmacological things. They are all the same.

So, you tried to control for the conventional biological and chemical explanations that have been made. But then it seems you are left with another question: Why did only 18% of the 344 patients report a near-death experience?

Exactly. I don't know. But the only thing we can know is that when it should be a physiological reaction due to a lack of oxygen to the brain, then when you have cardiac arrest, you have no blood pressure. There is no oxygen going to the brain. You lose your consciousness. And your breathing stops. And your reflexes stop. And everything stops. And then you have an 80% of people in this situation who have full consciousness. So that is a mystery.

Another part of your study was that after two years there seemed to be a transformation in the 18% who had the NDE memories. There was a

transformation in their relationship to their life and other people and the world around them. After eight years, if I read your data correctly, the NDE experiencer described an even more increased transformation of thought and appreciation of life without fear of death?

Yes, one of the things is when you have a transformational change of people, you don't know if it's whether they've had a cardiac arrest or if it is because they have an NDE. So, what we did was do taped interviews lasting up to three hours after two years of all the survivors and eight years later, we had a matched control group of patients who had cardiac arrest as well without an NDE. The transformation, change in people who had the NDE is much more impressive compared to other who did not have the NDE experience and the main thing is that their life inside changes and their fear of death disappears.

When you talk with that group, do you get any insights from them about why they themselves feel that some sort of philosophical, spiritual transformation continues to increase eight years after an NDE?

It's a process that they cannot talk about it. They are neglected or laughed at by doctors, nurses and family. And what I saw is a society negative response to an NDE which leaves individuals to deny or suppress their experience for fear of rejection or ridicule. So they cannot talk about it unless they trust somebody or find someone who was open. Then they can talk about it and the integration starts of the change inside of losing the fear of death and what is important in life, especially those people who have had a panoramic life review.

In those panoramic life reviews, what has impressed you most?

Well, that all thoughts and words and deeds have been kept somewhere and that you again feel what happened when you get something or saw something and you feel the emotion of the other person who is involved. So you feel the emotions of somebody else, whether you gave love or just neglected him as well. You feel that as well and it gives you insight into what you did and what was the emotional impact on somebody else.

Civilization the last five thousand years has had many past and current religions that say at the moment of death there is a transition of consciousness to God or Allah and a heaven. Why then would anyone describing a near-death experience be treated with ridicule or disbelief?

Because they are trying to explain something, their experience, there are no words for and they are talking about meeting deceased relatives, they are talking about celestial landscapes, they are talking about a being of light. And a lot of people don't want to hear it.

They don't want to hear it?

They say, 'It's impossible! You have had a hallucination or it was the effect of medication or calm down.' So they cannot express what they want to about their experience because they cannot talk about it.

What you are saying is that the western world has some how changed in its perceptions so that a moment of death experience, as described in your 18% population, has suddenly for some reason been relegated by society as something that is politically not acceptable?

Yes, and also by churches. Also in Holland there are churches that are very conservative. And the people never dare to talk about it. They would not be welcome any more in the church.

But you can see why this is not only ironic, but contradictory if the church talks about praying and going to heaven upon death. Why would there be any ridicule of people who describe exactly such a process?

Because for them, it is not a matter of belief. It is a matter of knowing.

The NDE experiencer?

Yes. They said dead, to our surprise, is not dead. I was there, still. People who go to church say, 'You cannot say that.'

But isn't that why people are in church to survive death and go to heaven?

I think perhaps to believe, but not to know. I know. If you ever talk with people

with an NDE, whenever you talk to them - also I know psychologist Ken Ring as well - and when he talked to people and we have it here - I have talked with hundreds of NDEs, they all have the same problem that the people know that it is not proven that it is something possible, else, or beyond the body. So, they neglect it, ignore it and say it is not proven. But you cannot prove as a medical doctor. I don't know. But they know (the NDEs). They always say, 'I don't believe in life after death. I *know* there is some continuity of me which survives my body.'

And why is that memory in only 18% of the patients that you studied?

I don't know. There are also a lot of people who do not have an experience, but for me it is even a wonder that it happens at all. And I cannot explain it. It's a miracle. It's a miracle that it happens because I cannot explain it."

Websites:

<http://www.thelancet.com/journal>

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