

First hint of 'life after death' in biggest ever scientific study

Southampton University scientists have found evidence that awareness can continue for at least several minutes after clinical death which was previously thought impossible



Some cardiac arrest patients recalled seeing a bright light; a golden flash or the Sun shining Photo: Shaun Wilkinson / Alamy



By [Sarah Knapton](#), Science Correspondent

12:00AM BST 07 Oct 2014

Death is a depressingly inevitable consequence of life, but now scientists believe they may have found some light at the end of the tunnel.

The largest ever medical study into near-death and out-of-body experiences has discovered that some awareness may continue even after the brain has shut down completely.

It is a controversial subject which has, until recently, been treated with widespread scepticism.

But scientists at the University of Southampton have spent four years examining more than 2,000 people who suffered cardiac arrests at 15 hospitals in the UK, US and Austria.

And they found that nearly 40 per cent of people who survived described some kind of 'awareness' during the time when they were clinically dead before their hearts were restarted.

One man even recalled leaving his body entirely and watching his resuscitation from the corner of the room.

Despite being unconscious and 'dead' for three minutes, the 57-year-old social worker from Southampton, recounted the actions of the nursing staff in detail and described the sound of the machines.

"We know the brain can't function when the heart has stopped beating," said Dr Sam Parnia, a former research fellow at Southampton University, now at the State University of New York, who led the study.

"But in this case, conscious awareness appears to have continued for up to three minutes into the period when the heart wasn't beating, even though the brain typically shuts down within 20-30 seconds after the heart has stopped.

"The man described everything that had happened in the room, but importantly, he heard two beeps from a machine that makes a noise at three minute intervals. So we could time how long the experience lasted for.

"He seemed very credible and everything that he said had happened to him had actually happened."

Of 2060 cardiac arrest patients studied, 330 survived and of 140 surveyed, 39 per cent said they had experienced some kind of awareness while being resuscitated.

Although many could not recall specific details, some themes emerged. One in five said they had felt an unusual sense of peacefulness while nearly one third said time had slowed down or speeded up.

Some recalled seeing a bright light; a golden flash or the Sun shining. Others recounted feelings of fear or drowning or being dragged through deep water. 13 per cent said they had felt separated from their bodies and the same number said their senses had been heightened.

Dr Parnia believes many more people may have experiences when they are close to death but drugs or sedatives used in the process of resuscitation may stop them remembering.

"Estimates have suggested that millions of people have had vivid experiences in relation to death but the scientific evidence has been ambiguous at best.

"Many people have assumed that these were hallucinations or illusions but they do seem to corresponded to actual events.

“And a higher proportion of people may have vivid death experiences, but do not recall them due to the effects of brain injury or sedative drugs on memory circuits.

“These experiences warrant further investigation. “

Dr David Wilde, a research psychologist and Nottingham Trent University, is currently compiling data on out-of-body experiences in an attempt to discover a pattern which links each episode.

He hopes the latest research will encourage new studies into the controversial topic.

“Most studies look retrospectively, 10 or 20 years ago, but the researchers went out looking for examples and used a really large sample size, so this gives the work a lot of validity.

“There is some very good evidence here that these experiences are actually happening after people have medically died.

“We just don’t know what is going on. We are still very much in the dark about what happens when you die and hopefully this study will help shine a scientific lens onto that.”

The study was published in the journal Resuscitation.

Dr Jerry Nolan, Editor-in-Chief at Resuscitation said: “Dr Parnia and his colleagues are to be congratulated on the completion of a fascinating study that will open the door to more extensive research into what happens when we die.”

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/11144442/First-hint-of-life-after-death-in-biggest-ever-scientific-study.html>