

Implications of near-death experiences for the mind-brain relationship

ABSTRACT:

Background

Most neuroscientists believe that brain generates consciousness. An alternative view is that mind operates independent of its associated brain but is dependent on the brain for expression. The idea that brain generates consciousness is challenged by near-death experiences (NDEs), complex experiences that can occur when the brain is severely disabled. Exploration of brain activity during NDEs may shed light on the mind-brain relationship.

Aim

We reviewed the medical record of a detailed NDE during deep coma, focusing on the severity of condition and neurophysiology, in order to assess the implications of such NDEs for the mind-brain relationship.

Method

Three physicians separately reviewed the medical record of an 8-day coma during which the patient experienced a vivid NDE.

Results

The patient had an NDE with vivid perceptions, intense emotions, and clear memory, including of events around his body during the period of deepest coma. Medical records document that he was not expected to survive and that his brain function was severely impaired and unable to generate consciousness at the time of the NDE.

Conclusions

The patient was comatose and unresponsive, but nonetheless had a vivid NDE including complex perceptions, cognitions, emotions, and memory. This NDE during documented deep coma is incompatible with consciousness being produced by brain, but is compatible with consciousness being filtered by brain. We encourage other clinical investigators to report examples of NDEs in patients with severely compromised brain function in order to explore further the brain mechanisms associated with complex consciousness and the relationship between consciousness and brain function.

Keywords

Near-death experience, Mind-body relationship, Meningitis, Encephalitis, Coma

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