

Near-Death Experiences During Induced Cardiac Arrest

Results:

Near-death experiences (NDEs) reported by those who have been in life-threatening situations may include a sense observing surroundings from a visual perspective outside of the physical body. Research into out-of-body perceptions during NDEs has been hindered by lack of control over the conditions at the time of the NDE.

Patients with potentially fatal cardiac illness often have implantable cardioverters/defibrillators (ICDs) surgically implanted in their chests, electrical devices that monitor the heartbeat and, in the event of a cardiac arrest, automatically administer an electrical shock to return the heart to normal rhythm. After ICD implantation, a cardiac arrest is induced to test the ICD, exposing the patient to the opportunity to experience an NDE under controlled circumstances.

We placed a computer in the operating room that displayed randomly-selected unusual visual targets visible only from a perspective looking down upon the body of the unconscious patient. In interviews with patients before and after implantation of the ICD, we determined the incidence of NDEs during induced cardiac arrest, and whether patients could report accurate observations from an out-of-body perspective.

In a series of 52 induced cardiac arrests, no patient reported having had a near-death experience, and none reported a sense of having left the physical body or observing from an out-of-body visual perspective. In retrospect, reassurance to the patients that they were not in danger may have reduced the likelihood of NDEs; the brief duration of the induced cardiac arrest may have precluded the development of an NDE; and the pre-anesthetic sedative medication used may have interfered with memory of any experience.

Published work:

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