

reviews

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The Day I Died

BBC 2, 5 February at 9 pm

Rating ★★

Does the whole of your life really flash across your mind in an instant as you lose consciousness while drowning? Most of us must have wondered what it is like to die since death is one of the two certainties in life, along with taxation. It might be supposed that we can never know. However, there are many people who have recovered after losing consciousness in situations in which most others would have continued to death, and it is reasonable to suppose that their last thoughts might be the same as those of patients in similar situations who do not recover.

These are commonly described as “near death experiences.” Some of these, which are recalled subsequently, are surprisingly clear and detailed.

This programme is based on a number of anecdotal accounts of such experiences as well as a study from Southampton, which found 4 out of 63 patients who recovered from a cardiac arrest, and a similar Dutch

study, which found 41 out of more than 300 patients.

These survivors describe remarkably consistent phenomena—it is apparently pleasurable, peaceful, safe, and warm. There would appear to be no sound, there is an aura of calmness and tranquillity, and patients may describe love, joy, and the ability for telepathic communication. Thinking appears faster and there seems to be an acceleration of time.

Two other experiences are common—most patients describe a bright light in the centre of vision and they seem to be travelling down a tunnel towards it. Many patients also describe out of body experiences in which they seem to be observing themselves from a distance. The most striking example of this is a patient who was blind from birth and had never had any visual experience. She was involved in a road traffic incident and when she recovered she had some recollections of an out of body experience, apparently while she was unconscious, in which she could see herself. Some patients describe re-entering their bodies, as if returning from the dead.

Throughout the programme there is considerable confusion about death, near death, and anaesthesia. Patients are often described as being “clinically dead” and then recovering. This is to misunderstand the definition of death. An important criterion in the certification of death is the irrecoverable cessation of brain function. This defini-

tion precludes anaesthesia as clinical death since the brain is fully oxygenated with a normal blood flow and recovery occurs without brain damage; indeed, this definition of death precludes anyone who subsequently recovers.

The programme also states that an isoelectric EEG (electroencephalogram) is an indicator of brain death, which is not correct. It is entirely possible for some neuronal activity to persist, though not in a sufficiently widespread or integrated fashion to be recorded at the surface.

Psychologist Susan Blackmore proposes a purely physical explanation for these events and suggests that the experiences are recollections of what happens as consciousness is lost or as it is regained, but not while unconscious. The induction of endorphins might cause heightened awareness with tranquillity and Dr Blackmore sees no reason to postulate a separation of mind and brain.

On the other hand, Sam Parnia, clinical research fellow at the University of Southampton, and Peter Fenwick, consultant neuropsychiatrist at the University of London, argue that the evidence suggests a separation of mind and brain. They claim that the mind can live on when the brain is dead, suggesting that near death experiences can be retained in the mind and then re-fixed in the brain as it recovers so that they can be subsequently recalled. This is an interesting concept, but most people would not find it necessary to postulate such a separation between mind and brain to explain the events.

The history of medicine is full of examples of phenomena that at first could not be explained, but for which a purely physical explanation becomes apparent with further understanding of the mechanisms of the brain. This is likely to be the case with near death experiences. We have only to see a skilled showman working his magic to realise how easy it is for the brain to be fooled into thinking the impossible while we are in full possession of our faculties. How much easier, therefore, in circumstances associated with near death experiences.

Michael O'Brien *consultant neurologist, Guy's Hospital, London*

Items reviewed are rated on a 4 star scale (4=excellent)



Some patients who have lost consciousness have described out of body experiences