



Medical Pioneers of a Different Kind: Towards a New Paradigm integrating Body, Mind and Spirit

Carmen Gleadow

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At the United Nations, New York, on 11 September, 2008, an unprecedented symposium was held to announce the launch of a five-year research project on human consciousness. The largest global scientific conference of its kind, the symposium was led — as would be the research study — by Dr Sam Parnia, a critical care physician, clinical research fellow at the University of Southampton, in the United Kingdom, and director of cardiopulmonary resuscitation research at Stony Brook University Medical School, in New York. This multidisciplinary collaboration of international scientists and physicians was to explore ‘what happens to the human mind and consciousness during clinical death and the relationship between brain and consciousness’, with specific reference to out-of-body experiences. These would be scientifically evaluated. The Human Consciousness Project would include some twenty-five collaborating hospitals and advisory physicians. Most were based in the United Kingdom, including Oxford and Cambridge, together with Hammersmith and St George’s hospitals in London. Others were in the United States, including John Hopkins, the University of Virginia and Albert Einstein Medical College. Canada and Austria were also to take part, possibly expanding to other countries. It was also announced that an eighteen-month pilot project, to establish the procedures and methodology to be followed by all participating centres, had been completed, and that the study was ready to proceed. Its purposes included eliciting objective evaluations of the out-of-body observations, reported by people undergoing resuscitation in emergency and critical-care units, as a result of accidents and cardiac arrest. Parnia explained that the reason for focusing on the out-of-body feature of near-death experiences was that this could be assessed by scientific means. Existing research indicated that between 10 and 20 per cent of people who had been clinically dead and were subsequently resuscitated had conveyed lucid, well-structured thought processes, which included memory, reasoning capacity, sight and hearing. Since it is well-known that people report being at ceiling level while out of their bodies, observing what is happening in emergency rooms, images would be placed in such rooms above and beyond the eye level of those being treated. The material so placed would be unknown to the physicians and other researchers involved in the study. After resuscitation, the researchers would seek to find out how many people had reported seeing which (if any) of these images, and anything else that had transpired among medical staff while the patient was being treated. Hospital committees and ethical review boards reviewed the project protocol extensively and, when completed, the results of the study would be peer-reviewed in a major medical journal. Completion of the study, planned to take place in 2013, was peer reviewed, as explained in the Epilogue.

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