

# Letters To The Editor

## Australian Questionnaire Survey of NDEs

To the Editor:

Despite the interest in near-death experiences (NDEs) in countries such as the United States, no one yet appears to have undertaken similar research in Australia. Three years ago, a Melbourne colleague, Gary Little, and I began collecting accounts from within this country in order to partially remedy the situation. Not being in the medical profession, collection was made by public appeal.

We sent letters to the editors of a variety of newspapers asking readers to advise us of NDEs; we also used word of mouth and combed magazines. To date, 33 accounts have been collected: eight recorded on tape, 18 by letter, and the rest coming from scanty magazine articles.

We selected for analysis 26 of these, for whom a name and address were known and a fairly detailed report of the NDE was available. We forwarded to those 26 a letter and questionnaire consisting of 14 multiple-choice questions and a small personal section.

Twelve questionnaires, all usable, were returned. There were ten female and two male respondents. Their average age was 31 years at the time of the NDE, with a range from seven to 51 years of age. Nine out of the 12 stated that they had no knowledge of NDEs before the event.

Nine out of the 12 reported that their NDEs were not difficult to put into words; all agreed that the visual vividness of the event was either "quite vivid" or "as clear as real life." Sensations experienced were mainly visual, although some auditory and tactile sensations were also noted; none were olfactory. A feeling of time distortion was noticed by four respondents: two reported the slowing of time, one time stopping, and one acceleration of time.

The majority of NDEs were reported to have occurred in a hospital during an illness or surgery. In describing their recollections, ten reported perceiving being separated from their own physical bodies, six reported being "above their physical bodies," and one stated that there was a "white cord" connecting the two bodies. Nine out of the 12 described a sensation of traveling during the experience, and six related approaching a limit or boundary of some kind.

Five respondents said that they had encountered someone else during the NDE, describing "a presence," "an apparition," "God," or in one case, a great-grandmother. Only two reported a review of life experiences.

In response to a set of questions derived from Kenneth Ring's Life Changes Questionnaire (Ring, 1984), most of our respondents reported a strongly decreased fear of death, increased love of life, increased religiousness, and increased self-esteem.

These NDEs in general closely follow those already documented from overseas in almost every respect. Although many were years ago (an average of 23.1 years), the vividness of the NDE was said in accompanying written or taped material to have been the reason the event remained clear in the mind.

Although a larger sample is clearly needed to confirm or deny, one interesting difference between these Australian cases and those reported elsewhere is that most of our sample reported "no real difficulty" in expressing what happened. Much has been made elsewhere of the ineffability of the NDE (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982). It is also noted that all of those who claimed to have separated from and

visualized their physical bodies related being "above" the physical form; the same observation has been made by many reporting out-of-body experiences (Green, 1973).

Michael Sabom (1982) found 33% of his sample of NDEs to be autoscopic, involving viewing one's own body; 48% transcendental, involving another realm or dimension; and 19% having both autoscopic and transcendental elements. In our Australian sample, only one was autoscopic and eight transcendental, with two having features of both types and one not fitting either label.

Bruce Greyson (1985) categorized his sample of NDEs as being 43% transcendental, 42% affective, and 16% cognitive. Although it was difficult to assign our cases to these three categories, since we did not use the same questions as Greyson, of the six that could be categorized, three were transcendental, three affective, and none cognitive.

We hope that professionals may now be stimulated to collect a larger sample of Australian NDEs and undertake a thorough analysis along the lines of existing work overseas.

### References

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