A PILOT STUDY INTO THE INCIDENCE OF DEATHBED PHENOMENA IN NURSING HOMES AND HOSPICES IN HAMPShIRE, ENGLAND AND IN ROTTERDAM, HOLLAND

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Objectives: To examine the frequency, nature and possible causes of end of life experiences (ELEs), the training of carers in this little known area, and to compare the experiences of the dying in Holland and the UK.

Method: We questioned a palliative care team in London about the frequency and character of end of life phenomena. A 40 item questionnaire was constructed and validated by the palliative care workers. Two hospices and one nursing home in England, and three hospices in Rotterdam were identified. Ethical permission was given and carers who agreed to take part in the study completed the questionnaire, covering experiences encountered during the previous five years. They were then interviewed and during the coming year kept a diary recording experiences they heard. Prospectively, they again completed the questionnaire and had a further interview.

Results: Shortly before death ELEs are not infrequent, particularly deathbed visions (60%), transition to another reality, and deathbed coincidences. At death, shapes were seen leaving the body and light surrounding it. Mechanical interference, clocks stopping, and odd animal reactions were reported. Carers in England had received little training in ELEs, while over 70% of Dutch carers were trained. 80% of all carers believed ELEs were spiritual, 10% thought them due to medication or organic causes. There was no relationship to demographic factors or religious affiliation. Carers claimed ELEs were comforting to the dying and helped the grieving relatives.

Conclusion: ELEs are not uncommon. No cultural differences were found between UK and Holland. Neither country was aware of the full range of phenomena. Education in this area is essential, particularly for the medical profession. (2092; 2333 including ref. 1 only. 3011 with refs. 1-5)

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