

# Life goes on

Cardiologist Pim van Lommel did a monumental study of near-death experiences--which raises fascinating questions about life after death, DNA, the collective unconscious, and everyone's karma.

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When the *The Lancet* published his study of near-death experiences, Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel couldn't have known it would make him into one of the world's most-talked-about scientists. It seems everyone wants to know about the man who managed to get his study of this controversial topic published in one of the leading journals of medical research. Yet it's not really surprising that its publication in 2001 created a stir. Never before had such a systematic study been conducted into the experiences of people who were declared dead and then came back to life. And never before have we seen such a clear illustration of how these people's stories could affect our way of thinking about life and death.

Van Lommel, 63, isn't one to seek name and fame. On this lovely summer day in his garden near the Dutch city of Arnhem, he displays more interest in what's going on at *Ode* magazine than in his own story. That same deep curiosity was at work 35 years ago when Van Lommel, working as a physician's assistant in a hospital, listened intently to a patient talk about her near-death experience. He was immediately fascinated. But it wasn't until years later, as he read the book *Return from Tomorrow* in which the American doctor George Ritchie describes his own near-death experience in detail, that Van Lommel wondered if there were many other people who had undergone similar experiences.

Van Lommel decided from then on to ask all his patients whether they remembered anything that had happened during their cardiac arrests. "The answer was usually 'no' but sometimes 'why?' When I heard the latter, I extended the office visit." Over two years he heard stories from 12 patients and his scientific curiosity was piqued. Those stories were the beginning of a years-long study.

*I was looking down at my own body from up above and saw doctors and nurses fighting for my life. I could hear what they were saying. Then I got a warm feeling and I was in a tunnel. At the end of that tunnel was a bright, warm, white, vibrating light. It was beautiful. It gave me a feeling of peace and confidence. I floated towards it. The warm feeling became stronger and stronger. I felt at home, loved, nearly ecstatic. I saw my life flash before me. Suddenly I felt the pain of the accident once again and shot back into my body. I was furious that the doctors had brought me back.*

Just about every description of a near-death experience is this beautiful. People feel connected and supported. They grasp how the universe works. They experience unconditional love. They feel free of the pressing concerns of earthly existence. Who wouldn't want such an experience? "It sounds fantastic, doesn't it?" Van Lommel laughs. "But it's not always easy to deal with. When people come back, they often have the feeling they're being imprisoned. And it can take years before they are able or have the courage to integrate the insights they've gained into their everyday life."

Still, a majority of people who have had a near-death experience describe it as magnificent and say it enriched their lives. Van Lommel explains, "The most important thing people are left with is that they are no longer afraid of death. This is because they have experienced that their consciousness lives on, that there is continuity. Their life and their identity don't end when the body dies. They simply have the feeling they're taking off their coat."

That may sound like it's coming from someone who's spent a little too much time hanging around New Age bookstores. But from what Van Lommel has seen, near-death experiences are not at all limited to members of

the “spiritual” community. They are just as prevalent among people who were extremely skeptical about the topic beforehand.

*I became “detached” from the body and hovered within and around it. It was possible to see the surrounding bedroom and my body even though my eyes were closed. I was suddenly able to ‘think’ hundreds or thousands of times faster—and with greater clarity—than is humanly normal or possible. At this point I realized and accepted that I had died. It was time to move on. It was a feeling of total peace—completely without fear or pain, and didn’t involve any emotions at all.*

The most remarkable thing, Van Lommel says, is that his patients have such consciousness-expanding experiences while their brains register no activity. But that’s impossible, according to the current level of medical knowledge. Because most scientists believe that consciousness occurs in the brain, this creates a mystery: How can people experience consciousness while they are unconscious during a cardiac arrest (a clinical death)?

After all those years of intensive study, Van Lommel still speaks with reverence about the miracle of the near-death experience. “At that moment these people are not only conscious; their consciousness is even more expansive than ever. They can think extremely clearly, have memories going back to their earliest childhood and experience an intense connection with everything and everyone around them. And yet the brain shows no activity at all!”

This has raised a number of large questions for Van Lommel: “What is consciousness and where is it located? What is my identity? Who is doing the observing when I see my body down there on the operating table? What is life? What is death?”

*The body I observed laying in bed was mine, but I knew it wasn’t time to leave. My time on earth wasn’t up yet; there was still a purpose.*

In order to convince his colleagues of the validity of these new insights, Van Lommel first had to demonstrate that this expansion of the consciousness occurred, in fact, during the period of brain death. It was not difficult to prove. Patients were often able to describe precisely what had happened during their cardiac arrest. They knew, for example, exactly where the nurse put their dentures or what doctors and family members had said. How would someone whose brain wasn’t active know these things?

Nevertheless, some scientists continue to assert that these experiences must happen at a time when there is still some brain function going on. Van Lommel is crystal clear in his response: “When the heart stops beating, blood flow stops within a second. Then, 6.5 seconds later, EEG activity starts to change due to the shortage of oxygen. After 15 seconds there is a straight, flat line and the electrical activity in the cerebral cortex has disappeared completely. We cannot measure the brain stem, but testing on animals has demonstrated that activity has ceased there as well. Moreover, you can prove that the brain stem is no longer functioning because it regulates our basic reflexes, such as the pupil response and swallowing reflex, which no longer respond. So you can easily stick a tube down someone’s throat. The respiratory centre also shuts down. If the individual is not reanimated within five to 10 minutes, their brain cells are irreversibly damaged.” He is aware that his findings on consciousness fly in face of orthodox scientific thinking. It is remarkable that an authoritative science journal like *The Lancet* was willing to publish his article. But it wasn’t without a struggle. Van Lommel recalls with a smile, “It took months before I got the green light. And then they suddenly wanted it finished, within a day.”

Van Lommel’s work raises profound questions about what “death” actually means: “Up to now, ‘death’ simply meant the end of consciousness, of identity, of life,” he notes. But his study topples that concept, along with the prevailing medical myths about who has near-death experiences. “In the past, these experiences were attributed to physiological, psychological, pharmacological or religious reasons. So to a shortage of oxygen, the release of

endorphins, receptor blockages, fear of death, hallucinations, religious expectations or a combination of all these factors. But our research indicates that none of these factors determine whether or not someone has a near-death experience.”

*This experience is a blessing for me, for now I know for sure that body and soul are separated, and that there is life after death. It has convinced me that consciousness lives on beyond the grave. Death is not death, but another form of life.*

Van Lommel contends that the brain does not produce consciousness or store memories. He points out that American computer science expert Simon Berkovich and Dutch brain researcher Herms Romijn, working independently of one another, came to the same conclusion: that it is impossible for the brain to store everything you think and experience in your life. This would require a processing speed of 1024 bits per second. Simply watching an hour of television would already be too much for our brains. “If you want to store that amount of information—along with the associative thoughts produced—your brain would be pretty much full,” Van Lommel says. “Anatomically and functionally, it is simply impossible for the brain to have this level of speed.”

So this would mean that the brain is actually a receiver and transmitter of information. “You could compare the brain to a television set that tunes into specific electromagnetic waves and converts them into image and sound.

“Our waking consciousness, the consciousness we have during our daily activities,” Van Lommel continues, “reduces all the information there is to a single truth that we experience as ‘reality.’ During near-death experiences, however, people are not limited to their bodies or their waking consciousness, which means they experience many more realities.”

This explains why people who have a near-death experience sometimes have great difficulty functioning in their daily lives afterwards. They retain the sensitivity that enables them to tune into different channels simultaneously, making a cocktail party or bus ride an overwhelming experience as all the information from people around them comes in on all channels.

*I saw a man who looked at me lovingly, but whom I did not know. At my mother’s deathbed, she confessed to me that I had been borne out of an extramarital relationship, my father being a Jewish man who had been deported and killed during the Second World War, and my mother showed me his picture. The unknown man that I had seen years before during my near-death experience turned out to be my biological father.*

According to Van Lommel, near-death experiences can only be explained if you assume that consciousness, along with all our experiences and memories, is located outside the brain. When asked where that consciousness is located, Van Lommel can only speculate. “I suspect there is a dimension where this information is stored—a kind of collective consciousness we tune into to gain access to our identity and our memories.”

By means of this collective information field, we are not only connected to our own information, but also that of others and even the information from the past and future. “There are people who see the future during a near-death experience,” Van Lommel says. “For example, there was a man who saw his future family. Years later, he found himself in a situation he had already seen during his near-death experience. I suspect this is also the way déjà vu works.” According to Van Lommel’s research, during a near-death experience, people can also make contact with the dead, even if they don’t know them.

But how does the brain “know” what information to tune into? How can someone tune into his own memories and not those of other people? Van Lommel’s answer is surprisingly short and simple: “DNA. And primarily the so-called ‘junk DNA,’ which accounts for around 95 percent of the total, whose function we don’t understand.” He suspects that the DNA, unique to every person and every organism, works like a receptor mechanism, a kind of simultaneous translator between the information fields and the organism.

The idea that DNA works as a receptor mechanism to attune people to their specific consciousness fields sheds new light on the discussion of organ transplantation. Imagine you get a new heart. The DNA of that heart will gear itself to the consciousness field of the donor, not the recipient. Does this mean you suddenly get different information? Yes, Van Lommel says: “There are stories of people who developed radically different desires and lifestyles after an organ transplant. For example, there’s a story of a ballet dancer who suddenly wanted to drive a motorcycle and eat junk food.”

*I perceived not only what I had done, but even in what way it had influenced others.*

The cliché is true: People see their lives flash before them at the time of death. And people gain insight into the consequences of their actions. They might see themselves as at 4 years old, taking away their sister’s toys, and feel her pain. Van Lommel comments, “At that moment it’s as if you have the thoughts of someone else inside you. You are given insight into the impact of your thoughts, words and deeds on yourself and others. So it appears that every thought we have is a form of energy that continues to exist forever.”

People who have experienced such a “life review” say it’s not so much about what you do as the intention behind it. “It is extremely intense to experience that everything that goes around comes around.” Van Lommel leans forward to be sure his words come across. “No one avoids the consequences of their thoughts. That’s very confrontational. Some people discover there’s something they can never put right. Others come back and immediately start calling people to apologize for something they did 20 years ago.”

So is there a Last Judgment after all? Van Lommel is clear: “Absolutely not. No one is judged. It’s an insight experience. Most people go through this flashback in the presence of a being made of light. That being is entirely loving, absolutely accepting, without judgment, but has complete insight. The flashback changes people’s understanding of life. They adopt other values. They feel they are one with nature and the planet. There is no longer any difference between themselves and others. It’s not about power, appearance, nice cars, clothes, a young body. It’s about completely different things: love for yourself, for nature, for your fellow human beings. The message is as old as time, but now they’ve experienced it themselves and they have to live by it.”

Then, after a short silence, he says, thoughtfully: “It’s almost scary to realize that every thought has a consequence. If you let that sink in...every thought we have, positive or negative, has an impact on us, each other and nature.”

Do you have to nearly die to learn these life lessons? No, says Van Lommel, who has never had a near-death experience himself. Thanks to his research, he learned so many valuable lessons that he decided to abandon his career in cardiology in 1992 and dedicate himself fully to further research, publishing and lecturing on the subject of near-death experiences. He founded the Merkawah Foundation in the Hague, the Dutch department for the International Association for Near-Death Studies, which offers information and guidance to Dutch people who have had near-death experiences.

“Working with it and being open to it have changed my life,” Van Lommel says. “I now see that everything stems from consciousness. I better understand that you create your own reality based on the consciousness you have and the intention from which you live. I understand that consciousness is the basis of life, and that life is principally about compassion, empathy and love.”

*The italicized segments of this article were taken from interviews Pim van Lommel and his research team conducted with people who have had a near-death experience.*

*More information on International Association for Near-Death Studies: [www.iands.org](http://www.iands.org).*