

## **AWARENESS WHILST UNABLE TO MOVE IN THE ICU**

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### **Introduction**

Awareness under anaesthesia in the operating room is rare but often devastating. The extent of this awareness in ICUs is unknown.

### **Objective**

To determine the recalled experience of awareness while unable to move in the ICU.

### **Method**

Our routine clinical audit includes attempting to contact surviving DCCM patients about 8 weeks after transfer. We attempted to conduct a structured telephone interview (providing quantitative and qualitative data) with the 2758 DCCM survivors who had been admitted between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1998 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2000. Contacted patients were asked, "Can you remember being unable to move, not even your little finger, while you were awake and aware of your surroundings?" Those who did remember this were asked to rate the subjective stress of the experience on an ordinal scale (0 none to 10 maximum) and to describe their experiences. Data were stored on a secure local area network.

### **Results**

In the 3-year period, 1745/2637 hospital survivors (63%) were interviewed and 59/1745 (3.4%) reported being aware and unable to move. Reported stress ranged from zero (12 patients) to 10 (8 patients) with a median of 8. Thirty-seven patients described their experiences. Most common descriptions were: overhearing conversation (11), attempting to scream and/or open eyes (10), fear of being dead or dying (7), recalling procedures (4) and out-of-body experiences (3) including one who thought his brain was in a glass jar outside his body.

### **Conclusion**

Awareness whilst unable to move, while uncommon in the ICU, is a real and often horrific experience for some patients. Intensive care staff need to be vigilant to this problem.

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