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The Moment of Death

Michael Barbato, MBBS, FRACP, Greg Barclay, MBBS, FACHPM, Jan Potter, MBChB, FRACP, Wilf Yeo, MD, FRACP

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To the Editor:

Most palliative care patients enter a phase of unconsciousness before death. The time from unresponsiveness until death varies and the decline is occasionally interrupted by episodes of unexpected lucidity even in the final moments of life.¹ Visible evidence includes a fleeting smile, eye opening, gestures, shedding of tears (lacrima mortis) and “deathbed” visions. These occurrences are sometimes viewed by grieving families with disbelief and a concern their loved one may be distressed. This prospective study employed the Bispectral Index monitor to investigate whether changes in the Bispectral Index score (BIS) occurred around the time of death and factors that may influence such a change.

The monitor analyses electroencephalographic (EEG) input from the frontal cortices and converts this by means of an algorithm to a dimensionless BIS which ranges from 100 to 0 where 100 represents full awareness, 50 deep sedation and 0 brain death.² The technology is a validated means of measuring the level of sedation in anaesthetised patients, but has not yet been validated outside of that setting.

Following ethics approval from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee, thirty consenting, eligible and neurologically intact patients were connected to the monitor from the time they became unresponsive until death. The final 30 minutes of each patient’s recording was analysed for changes in the BIS, electromyographic activity (EMG) and signal quality (SQ). Our objectives were to ascertain 1) whether there is a significant change in the BIS at the moment of death, 2) the frequency and degree of the change 3) the influence of EMG activity, depth of sedation and duration of unconsciousness

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