Awareness during surgery and a ‘third state’ of consciousness: dysanaesthesia

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Awareness during surgery—wherein a patient consciously experiences and remembers things that happen during their surgery—is a rare yet alarming prospect for patients. In a presentation at the Annual Congress of the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (AAGBI), in Dublin, Ireland, Professor Jaideep Pandit, Consultant Anaesthetist & Fellow of St John's College, Oxford, UK, will discuss the difficulties inherent in monitoring the conscious state. He will present an argument that there can exist a third state of consciousness that is neither fully conscious nor unconscious, termed ‘dysanaesthesia’, and that this presents a challenge for monitoring.

“Even in 2013, we are still struggling to define what consciousness actually is,” says Prof Pandit. “We can obviously see when someone is awake and responding, and when someone is asleep or unconscious, but our understanding of what changes us from one state to the other is still evolving.”

Data from studies worldwide show that if patients are directly asked following surgery if they recalled anything, about 1 in 500 will say they did. But the initial baseline report of the large, national project NAP5 found that only 1 in 15,000 of patients spontaneously report awareness during their surgery, and only a third of those (so 1 in 45000 patients undergoing surgery) reported any pain or distress as part of the experience. “The difference between the incidence of 1:500 and 1:15,000 suggest that even in the rare instances where patients are experiencing awareness, in most cases the sensation is a ‘neutral’ and not necessarily unpleasant one,” says Prof Pandit. “What we are possibly seeing is a third state of consciousness—dysanaesthesia—in which the patient is certainly aware of events, but not concerned by this knowledge (especially as they are not in pain).”

Prof Pandit will also discuss evidence for dysanaesthesia coming from experiments in which patients are anaesthetised, but have their whole body paralysed with neuromuscular blocking drugs apart from their forearm, allowing them to move their fingers in response to commands or to signify they are awake or in pain during surgery. “To date no patients in these experiments have moved their fingers voluntarily to indicate wakefulness, yet 1 in 3 (a third) of them can move their fingers if asked to by medical teams. This again suggests that in a majority of those patients who experience awareness, it may not be unpleasant or distressing to them, since they are not moving their fingers to make medical teams aware of this.”

AAGBI President Elect Dr Andrew Hartle said “Patient Safety and Research are two of the AAGBI’s major priorities. The work of Prof Pandit, and his colleagues at the NAP5 project is possibly the world’s biggest study of the problem of awareness, something we know is a major concern for patients needing anaesthesia. The AAGBI is committed to research of this sort, helping to make modern anaesthesia even safer for patients”

**Professor Jaideep Pandit, Consultant Anaesthetist & Fellow of St John's College, Oxford University Hospitals, Oxford, UK T), jaideep.pandit@dpag.ox.ac.uk**
Notes to editors: For more information on the NAP5 project, see [http://www.nationalauditprojects.org.uk/NAP5_home](http://www.nationalauditprojects.org.uk/NAP5_home)

AAGBI contact:

Karin Pappenheim, Executive Director, AAGBI
T) +44 (0) 20 7631 8802; +44 (0) 7825 295745 E) karinpappenheim@aagbi.org

Varsha Ramani, Communications Manager, AAGBI
T) +44 (0) 20 7631 8854; +44 (0) 7825 299549 E) varsharamani@aagbi.org

Alternative contact:

Si Scott, Media Manager, Royal College of Anaesthetists, T) +44-7730 989 692 E)
[Simonandrewscott@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Simonandrewscott@hotmail.co.uk)

Tony Kirby of Tony Kirby PR Ltd. T) +44 7834 385827 E) [tony@tonykirby.com](mailto:tony@tonykirby.com)

About the AAGBI

The Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (AAGBI) is the leading membership body for over 10,500 anaesthetists in the UK and Ireland. The AAGBI promotes patient care, safety and advances anaesthesia through education, publications, research and international work, as well as the professional aspects of the specialty.

To find out more about the work of the AAGBI, visit [www.aagbi.org](http://www.aagbi.org)

About the AAGBI Annual Congress 2013

Annual Congress is the flagship event of the AAGBI and the 2013 conference is being held at Dublin from 18-20 September. The Annual Congress is one of the leading anaesthetic meetings, with an attendance of around 800-1000 national and international delegates. It features informative sessions, high profile speakers and an extensive trade exhibition. Aimed at all levels of anaesthetists from trainees to consultants, it is a European CPD accredited meeting.

For more information on the meeting, please visit [www.annualcongress.org](http://www.annualcongress.org)