

# Peter Fenwick

Peter Fenwick (1935–2024) was a British neuropsychiatrist, neurophysiologist and parapsychologist who studied near-death experiences and other paranormal phenomena starting in the 1980s. He practised meditation and other spiritual techniques, convinced that science and spirituality are not inimical and that consciousness can be understood in both ways.

## Life and Career

Peter Brooke Cadogan Fenwick was born in Kenya on 25 May 1935. His father was a coffee farmer, his mother a surgeon.<sup>1</sup> He studied natural science at Trinity College, Cambridge and took his clinical training at St Thomas's Hospital, London.<sup>2</sup> Aged 21, he became interested in consciousness and metaphysics after reading works by Aldous Huxley and Colin Wilson,<sup>3</sup> and he became determined in his career to bridge the gap between conventional neuroscience and the parapsychological/spiritual realm.<sup>4</sup>

Fenwick held a research position as senior lecturer at the Institute of Psychiatry in London and was also a consultant neurophysiologist at St. Thomas's and Westminster Hospitals in London. From 2000 to 2010 he worked as a visiting professor at the Magnetoencephalography Science Programme at RIKEN Neuroscience Institute in Tokyo. Here he studied the promising neuroimaging technique of magnetoencephalography (MEG), which very finely measures the brain's magnetic field in real time, monitoring its action millisecond to millisecond without distortion from the skull and thus providing the most comprehensive neuroimaging currently available.<sup>5</sup>

Fenwick was most recently an *emeritus* consultant neuropsychiatrist at Kings' College, London, and the Maudsley Hospital (held to be the foremost psychiatric teaching hospital in the United Kingdom), the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, and Broadmoor Hospital in Crowthorne, Berkshire, UK, a high-security psychiatric institution for violent offenders.

Fenwick had a longstanding interest in the mind/brain interface, the problem of consciousness, and [near-death experiences](#), a topic on which he was held to be Britain's leading authority. He appeared as an expert witness in high-profile legal cases relating to automatism and sleep.

He published more than 300 research papers on the subjects of epilepsy, consciousness, sleep, near-death experiences (NDEs), end-of-life experiences, legal questions on the time of death and other death-related phenomena relating to death, collaborating with his wife Elizabeth Fenwick on four books on parapsychological topics (see 'Works' below). He contributed to numerous radio, television and YouTube programmes on these topics (see 'Video' below), and served on editorial boards of several academic journals including the parapsychological *Journal of Scientific Exploration*.

Fenwick pursued spiritual development alongside his scientific work. He began meditating daily in 1965 and claimed to have done so ever since.<sup>6</sup> In his 2019 autobiography *Shining Light on Transcendence* he described in detail the work of the French philosopher/healer Alain Forget and his use of electroencephalogram (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to map Forget's brain activity while carrying out healing.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Fenwick passed away on 22 November 2024, aged 89.

## Parapsychological Research

Fenwick researched a wide variety of parapsychological and paranormal phenomena, including the physiology of mystical experiences, mystical and spiritual experiences in epileptics, healing effects on water, and most recently, [terminal lucidity](#) in children. In particular he focused on key topics related to consciousness, the brain and death.

### Near-Death Experiences

Fenwick responded sceptically to Raymond Moody's 1975 work on near-death experiences (NDEs), *Life After Life*, but became fascinated after hearing a patient he had known for many years report an NDE resembling those described in the book.<sup>8</sup> Frustrated by refusals on the part of clerical and medical leaders to let him interview patients who were dying or who had been clinically dead, he turned to nursing staff and visiting relatives and thus found a wealth of leads.<sup>9</sup>

The subsequent NDE investigations resulted in Fenwick collaborating with his wife Elizabeth on their 1995 book *The Truth in the Light: An Investigation of Over 300 Near-Death Experiences*. The Fenwicks analyzed 350 responses they received to a questionnaire filled out by people in the UK who had seen them on television programmes. They quoted some accounts at length and confirmed known common aspects of NDEs such as feelings of serenity and vitality, immersion in very bright light, view of the body from above, life review, and loss of all fear of death. They also drew on Fenwick's neuroscience expertise to assess alternative explanations.<sup>10</sup>

Fenwick participated in the mass study of NDEs entitled [AWARE](#) (AWAREness during REsuscitation) conducted in fifteen hospitals in the UK, USA and Austria.

### End-of-life Experiences

Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick's 2008 book *The Art of Dying* was compiled from extensive investigations of people approaching the ends of their lives. Detailed accounts of experiences are quoted, revealing common themes such as [deathbed visions](#) of deceased loved ones, [crisis impressions](#) and visions of light. While grounded in science, the book takes an instructional and practical approach, exploring the dying-related practices of different cultures and offering recommendations to minimize suffering during the dying process. The Fenwicks produced several brochures for the public and for health professionals designed to help make death as painless and non-frightening as possible (for example, see 'Guide' below).

## Dreams

The parapsychological sections of the Fenwicks' 1999 book on dreams, *The Hidden Door*, cover two main types of [ESP phenomena in dreams](#), namely telepathy and [precognition](#), both of which are commonly known about anecdotally, the latter even in ancient times. They point out that both Freud and Jung acknowledged the occurrence of telepathy in dreaming, and cite reports of shared dreams between emotionally-close people, and the [Maimonides dream telepathy research](#) of the 1960s and 1970s. The Fenwicks pointed out that precognitive dreams more often presage disasters and death, for instance the Teton Dam collapse in the US, and the Aberfan coal-spoil disaster in Wales, rather than ordinary life events.

## Reincarnation

In their book *Past Lives* (2001), the Fenwicks quoted cases sent by readers in response to a newspaper article, providing a fairly comprehensive discussion of reincarnation issues. They acknowledged the scientific approach adopted by the reincarnation research pioneer [Ian Stevenson](#), albeit preferring purely psychological explanations for some of Stevenson's cases.

## Consciousness

Fenwick was perhaps the first scientist to monitor the brain activity of people while meditating, observing patterns that correlated with their reported experiences. One of his subjects was the late rock musician George Harrison. He also tested meditators for an ability to require less oxygen, with less success.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Fenwick personally explored consciousness through Zen meditation by practising it in Japan during his times at the RIKEN Neuroscience Institute. His meditational experience and personal work with Alain Forget inspired an interest in the sudden expansion of consciousness he variably terms 'awakening', 'enlightenment' and 'breakthrough'. He considers this transformation to be a natural stage of human evolution, agreeing with the early Canadian psychiatrist and coiner of the term 'cosmic consciousness' Richard Maurice Bucke (1837–1902), as well as Alain Forget and other sources. Fenwick contended that awakening does not necessarily require training but comes to people more often through overwhelming emotional trauma or spiritual experience. The resulting state is characterized by a stable core sense of joy unrelated to circumstances; a focus on the present; a sense of self as universal rather than egotistical; and a view of other people not as their bodies but as flows of energy.<sup>[12](#)</sup> Fenwick notes that awakening is more common than thought and thus due for scientific examination. He writes, 'We are on the cusp of a scientific revolution in our understanding of the nature of expanded consciousness.'<sup>[13](#)</sup>

## Affiliations and Mentoring

Fenwick was a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He served as president of the British branch of the [International Association for Near Death Studies](#). He headed up the Scientific and Medical Network, a group of doctors and scientists dedicated to fostering intuitive as well as rational mental processes to the benefit of science and medicine,<sup>[14](#)</sup> and the Horizon Research Foundation, devoted to funding

end-of-life research.<sup>[15](#)</sup> Leading NDE researchers whose work he has supported include Sam Parnia, Margot Grey, Penny Sartori, Ornella Corazza, Sue Brayne, and Hilary Lovelace.<sup>[16](#)</sup>

## Works

### Select Books

*The Truth in the Light: An Investigation of Over 300 Near-Death Experiences* (1995, with Elizabeth Fenwick). London: Hodder Headline. [Softcover edition 1996; reprinted in 2012 by White Crow Books.]

*The Hidden Door: Understanding and Controlling Dreams* (1999, with Elizabeth Fenwick). New York: Berkley.

*Past Lives: An Investigation into Reincarnation Memories* (2001, with Elizabeth Fenwick). New York: Berkley.

*The Art of Dying: A Journey to Elsewhere* (2008, with Elizabeth Fenwick). London: Bloomsbury Continuum.

*Shining Light on Transcendence: The Unconventional Journey of a Neuroscientist* (2019). Guildford, Surrey, UK: White Crow Books.

### Short Parapsychological Works

Works both solely authored and co-authored by Fenwick are included here. See [here](#) for a fuller collection of Fenwick's short works (including those outside parapsychology).

Some aspects of the physiology of the mystical experience (1983). In *Psychological Survey, No. 4*, ed. by J. Nicholson & B. Foss. London: British Psychological Society.

'Psychic sensitivity', mystical experience, head injury and brain pathology (1985, with S. Galliano, M.A. Coate, V. Rippere, & D. Brown). *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 58, 35.

An examination of the effect of healing on water (1986, with R. Hopkins). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 53, 387-90. [Addendum (missing figure): *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 54, April 1987, 145-46.]

The interictal personality traits of temporal lobe epileptics: Religious belief and its association with reported mystical experiences (1984, with T. Sensky, A. Wilson, R. Petty, & C. Rose). In *Advances in Epileptology: XVth Epilepsy International Symposium*, ed. by R.J. Porter, R.H. Mattson, A.A. Ward Jr, & M. Dam, New York: Raven Press, 545-49.

The limitation of the neuroscientific approach (1993). In *Psi and Clinical Practice*, ed. by L. Coly & J.D.S. McMahon. New York: Parapsychology Foundation.

Near death experiences (2000). Paper presented at the *Perrott-Warrick Conference: Perspectives on the Paranormal*, Trinity College, Cambridge, UK.

[A qualitative and quantitative study of the incidence, features and aetiology of near death experiences in cardiac arrest survivors](#) (2001, with S. Parnia, D. Waller, & R. Yeates). *Resuscitation* 48, 149-56.

Inter-subject EEG correlations at a distance: The transferred potential (2001, with A. Sabell & C. Clarke). *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 44th Annual Convention*, 419-22.

Near-death experiences in cardiac arrest: Visions of a dying brain of visions of a new science of consciousness (2002, with S. Parnia). *Resuscitation*, 52, 5-11.

[The neuroscience of spirituality](#) (2003). [Web-published paper]

[Science and spirituality: A challenge for the 21st century](#) (2004). [Bruce Greyson Lecture from the International Association for Near-Death Studies 2004 Annual Conference.]

A prospectively studied near-death experience with corroborated out-of-body perceptions and unexplained healing (2006, with P. Sartori & P. Badham). *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 25/2, 69-84.

End of life experiences and the dying process in a Gloucestershire nursing home as reported by nurses and care assistants (2008, with S. Brayne & H. Lovelace). *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine* 25/3, 195-206.

Aftereffects of pleasurable Western adult near-death experiences (2009 with R. Noyes, Jr, J.M. Holden, & S.R. Christian). In *Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*, ed. by J. Holden, B. Greyson, & D. James. Santa Barbara, California, USA: Praeger/ABC/CLIO, 41-62.

Comfort for the dying: five year retrospective and one year prospective study of end of life experiences (2009, with H. Lovelace & S. Brayne). [Archive of Gerontology and Geriatrics](#).

End-of-life experiences: Reaching out for compassion, communication, and connection: Meaning of deathbed visions and coincidences (2011, with S. Brayne). *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine* 28/1, 7-15.

Can near death experiences contribute to the debate on consciousness? (2012). In *Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship*, ed. by A. Moreira-Almeida & F. Santos, London: Springer, 143-64.

[AWARE – AWAreness during REsuscitation – A prospective study](#) (2014, with S. Parnia, K. Spearpoint, G. de Vos, D. Goldberg, J. Yang, J. Zhu, K. Baker, H. Killingback, P. McLean, M. Wood, A.M. Zafari, N. Dickert, R. Beisteiner, F. Sterz, M. Berger, C. Warlow, S. Bullock, S. Lovett, R.M. McPara, S. Marti-Navarette, P. Cushing, P. Wills, K. Harris, J. Sutton, A. Walmsley, C.D. Deakin, P. Little, M. Farber, B. Greyson, & E.R. Schoenfeld). *Resuscitation* 85, 1799-1805.

*Neural correlates of transmitted light experiences during meditation* (2019, with C. Di Bernardi Luft, A. Ioannides, & J. Bhattacharya). *NeuroQuantology* 17/1, 31-41, doi: 10.14704/nq.2019.17.01.1318.

[To be and not to be. This is the answer: Consciousness survives](#) (2021, with P.F. Moretti, V. Basios, & M. Redfern). [Published on the [Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies](#) website after receiving an [honourable mention](#) in the Institute's 2021 essay contest.]

Terminal lucidity in a pediatric oncology clinic (2023, with P. Roehrs, B. Greyson, A. Kellehear, K. Kothe, M. Nahm, C. Roe, N. Tassell-Matamua, & M. Woollacott). *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, forthcoming, 1-4.

## Review

*Parapsychology in the Twenty-First Century* edited by M.A. Thalbourne & L. Storm (2005). *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 19/4, 613-15.

## Guide

[End-of-Life experiences: A guide for carers of the dying](#) (2008, with S. Brayne, in association with the Clinical Neuroscience Division, University of Southampton). [Brochure published online and preserved on the Internet Archive.]

## Video

Peter Fenwick's YouTube channel has many videos featuring him speaking on death, NDEs and other topics, [here](#).

Other videos:

[TEDxBrussels - Peter Fenwick - The Art of Dying Well](#)

[Peter Fenwick on 'Experiences surrounding near-death and dying'](#)

[What really happens when you die | Peter Fenwick's studies of end-of-life phenomena](#)

[Dr Peter Fenwick - 'Consciousness and dying' - Interview by Iain McNay](#)

[Dr Peter Fenwick on End-of-life experiences proving that we exist after death](#)

KM Wehrstein

## Literature

EnlightenNext Magazine (n.d.). [Peter Fenwick: Biography & Resources](#). [Web page]

Fenwick, P. (2019). *Shining Light on Transcendence: The Unconventional Journey of a Neuroscientist*. Guildford, UK: White Crow Books.

Fenwick, P., Di Bernardi Luft, C., Ioannides, A., & Bhattacharya, J. (2019). [Neural correlates of induced light experience during meditation: A pilot hyperscanning study](#). *NeuroQuantology* 17/1, 31-41.

Sartori, P. (2015). [Near-death experience](#). *Psi Encyclopedia*. London: The Society for Psychical Research.

Stevenson, I. (2000). *The Truth in the Light*, by Peter Fenwick, and *Light and Death*, by Michael Sabom [Double review]. *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 14/1, 132-34.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1](#). Fenwick (2019), 14.
- [2](#). Fenwick, personal communication, 24 September 2023. All information in this section is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted.
- [3](#). Fenwick (2019), 14.
- [4](#). Fenwick (2019), 15-16.
- [5](#). Fenwick (2019), 23.
- [6](#). Fenwick (2019), 27.
- [7](#). Fenwick (2019), 170-73. See also Fenwick et al (2019).
- [8](#). Fenwick (2019), 42.
- [9](#). Fenwick (2019), 44.
- [10](#). Stevenson (2000).
- [11](#). Fenwick (2019), 28-33.
- [12](#). Fenwick (2019), 46-47.
- [13](#). Fenwick (2019), 47.
- [14](#). EnlightenNext Magazine (n.d.).
- [15](#). Sartori (2015); see [here](#).
- [16](#). Sartori (2015); see [here](#).