

## 7) Summary of findings

In this study the children's experiences were different to that of their parents. Sometimes they found it hard to understand why their parents were so worried about them after they were discharged, because they did not remember as much as their parents about what had happened on PICU. However, some children were upset that they did not remember things and, once they were strong enough to talk, were grateful for clear explanations about why they had been admitted and what happened to them while they were unconscious.

They were sometimes embarrassed to admit they had strange dreams and hallucinations, but were relieved to hear that other children had similar experiences. Some children only realised the seriousness of what had happened to them months later.

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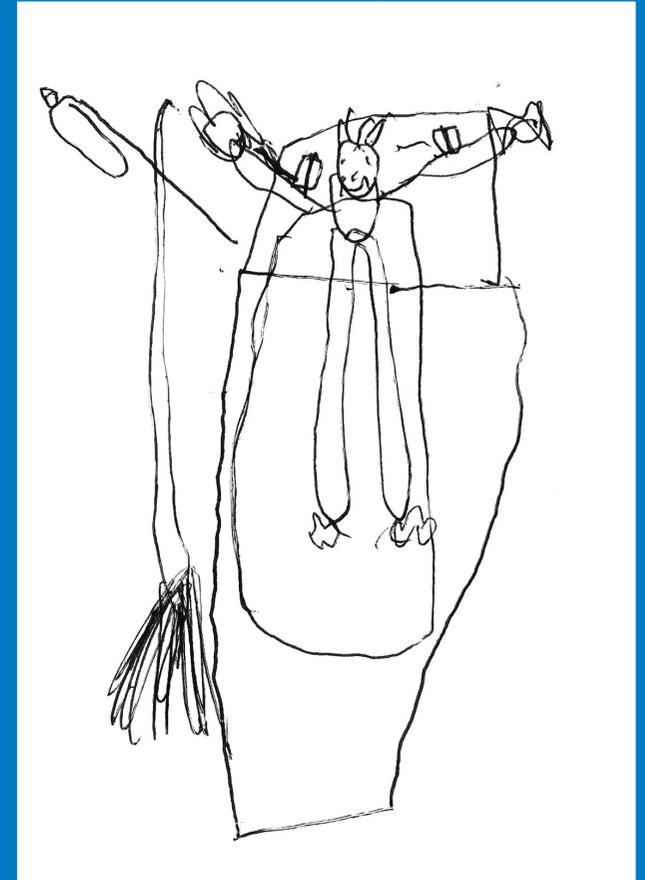


Reference: Colville, Kerry and Pierce (2008) Children's factual and delusional memories of intensive care. *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine* 2008;177:976-982

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## CHILDREN'S MEMORIES OF PICU



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**Staff on the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit at Great Ormond Street Hospital have recently completed a research project. The aim of the study was to find out more about what children remember about their time on PICU. One hundred and two children aged over seven were interviewed altogether, three months and one year after their admission.**

### **1) What do children remember?**

A third of children could not remember anything at all about their admission to PICU. Children with head injuries remembered less than the others. Most of the rest only remembered one or two things such as seeing a member of their family when they first woke up. Of the children who had been ventilated, only one in five could remember the sensation of the tube in their throat.

### **2) Did children have nightmares or hallucinations?**

A number of adults have said they had strange dreams and hallucinations when they were in intensive care. We wanted to see if this also happened with children. One in three children in the study could remember having some sort of strange experience like this. One in four remembered having hallucinations, usually towards the end of their admission. These were sometimes quite frightening and included seeing

scorpions and scary monsters. Some children remembered clearly thinking their parents were not really their parents for a day or two. Children were more likely to have these strange experiences if they were sedated on PICU for two days or more.

### **3) How did children feel after PICU?**

Although three quarters of children were back at school three months after they left PICU, many still felt much more tired than usual. Also one in four had high scores on a questionnaire measuring symptoms of post-traumatic stress. (These included having flashbacks and being unwilling to talk about what happened). None of the children who had been admitted after a planned operation had high scores but children who reported strange experiences like hallucinations had higher post-traumatic stress scores at three months than those who did not.

### **4) What did they say was the worst thing that happened?**

Although from the parents' point of view the PICU admission was usually the worst time, half of the children referred to what happened before the admission as the worst thing (for example their accident, or when they felt very ill). A few said the worst time was on the general ward afterwards, either because

they felt unwell or because they had to go through a difficult procedure, (such as an injection)

### **5) Did children report any positive changes?**

Yes – children were pleased to be feeling physically better and also reported that they now understood more about their bodies and their medical conditions. Several children also reported feeling braver as a result of what they had been through.

### **6) How did parents feel?**

Parents explained that they found their child's admission to PICU very frightening at the time and nearly half of them had a high score on a post-traumatic stress questionnaire at three months. In particular they still found that reminders of PICU (like hospital programmes on TV) made them feel anxious and made their heart beat faster, even though their child was out of danger. Parents of children admitted after a planned operation were less distressed than those whose children were admitted as an emergency.

The number of parents with high distress scores had fallen by one year, but there were some parents, and some children, whose scores went up between three months and one year.