

BMJ 2003;327:629 (13 September),

Weapons of mass destruction kill dinosaurs

In a second I realised that my eyes had deceived me, that I had misread the two headings and falsely combined them, and that "Saddam's weapons of mass destruction" was a separate article from "Killer dinosaurs." Nor did I pay attention to such items as "Aliens among us," "Psychic advice from Serena," "Conspiracies," and "The chamber of the bizarre." But my interest was drawn to an article supposedly written by a former funeral director claiming that 35 people are buried, embalmed, or cremated alive each day in the United States.

"It is a closely guarded industry secret," writes the author, "that nearly one in 50 people who are pronounced dead aren't dead after all—they're comatose" and "everybody has heard of people waking up at their own funeral." Hence the need to take precautions to avoid being painlessly bled to death and embalmed prematurely, or waking up "six feet under in a stuffy coffin" or in a "flame-drenched crematorium oven."

Some modern technology is no better than applying a mirror to the mouth and nose of the potential traveller to the underworld. For what are we to make of an item last year in a major Swedish newspaper reporting that "soon before the organ donation the patient started to move. The doctors had believed that the man was dead, but a check revealed that he was alive, and the organ donation was rapidly cancelled."

Also to feed a morbid imagination is a newspaper item describing how doctors thought that they felt a pulse in a woman who had been placed in a body bag in a refrigerator for three hours. Mercifully they were wrong. Yet in *The Premature Burial* Edgar Allan Poe wrote that "to be buried alive is, beyond question, the most terrific [agony] which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortals. That it has frequently, very frequently, so fallen will scarcely be denied by those who think. The boundaries that divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends, and the other begins?"

But we must not believe everything we read. And we may definitely rest reassured that the dinosaurs are in no danger of being exterminated by smallpox, nerve gas, or atomic radiation.