

'Dead' man shocks family by asking for a drink

By Bruce Johnston in Rome

(Filed: 26/01/2003)

A Sicilian man who had been pronounced dead by doctors startled relatives by sitting up just before he was to be put into his coffin and demanding a glass of water.

Minutes later 79-year-old Roberto De Simone, from Palermo, was rushed back to the Vincenzo Cervello hospital in the Sicilian capital, where 12 hours earlier doctors said he had died.

His wife and children, who had been praying over what they believed to be his corpse, declared his recovery to be a miracle. Hospital staff admit that they are baffled by his revival.

Mr De Simone himself was more enigmatic. "Old Uncle Giuseppe hasn't got me yet. Both he and paradise can wait," he is said to have declared in a quavering voice on his re-admission to hospital.

A family friend told The Telegraph that the comment was a reference to a late relation with whom Mr De Simone had never been on good terms. It was customary in Sicily, the friend said, for people to talk of the day they would die as being "taken by the Lord - but in Roberto's case, he was over the moon to find that he had not been taken by his eternal enemy, Uncle Giuseppe".

Details of the retired council employee's remarkable recovery were last week gripping locals who have an irresistible fascination with the afterlife.

Relatives said that after feeling unwell at his home in Palermo, Mr De Simone had been taken to the hospital the previous week. There he suffered a serious heart attack.

Doctors managed to restart his heart with an adrenaline injection but Donald Trozzi, his son-in-law, a policeman from Pescara, in mainland Italy, said: "At 3.30am, the doctors told us that my father-in-law had entered a coma and that later there had been brain death."

In an effort to spare the grieving family members the usual red tape that follows deaths in Italian hospitals, doctors arranged for Mr De Simone - whose heart was still beating - to be discharged as

if he were still alive. He was sent home in an ambulance.

There, his body was laid out on a bed, the undertaker was sent for and his Sunday best was being readied to dress him for his coffin. As his daughters Rosaria and Anna sat with other friends and relations weeping over his corpse, the nearly-departed Mr De Simone opened his eyes and in a plaintive voice said: "I'd like some water, please. You know, I'm awfully thirsty."

The women cried that it was a miracle and Mr De Simone was rushed back to the hospital, where he is now recovering from "serious respiratory problems".

The family friend told The Telegraph: "The family is understandably very tired and feeling fragile, and have asked to be left in peace."

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