



A Story of Reincarnation – and One Health

by Milorad Radakovic and his Guardian Angels and FVE heroes (2023), Edited by Karin de Lange



I am reincarnated. In November 2022, I literally died and came back to life – thanks to my veterinary colleagues, medical professionals and Hotel Dolmen Staff. A true One Health story, so to speak. The whole experience can only be described as *‘tragicomic’* since it happened immediately after my short presentation outlining the veterinary contribution and importance of Veterinary Public Health and One Health, at the General Assembly of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe held in Malta, in November 2022.

Last Presentation?

On 25 November 2022, I gave a short presentation to an audience of about one hundred vets from the EU and beyond. I highlighted that vets, together with medics and other professions, are crucial in the protection of animals, people and the environment they live in and share (see below My presentation on One Health). I also reflected on the fact that we (*the older vets*) are not so good at explaining this wider concept of One Health to the public and students. I was about to illustrate my talk by a very practical example.

As I sat down, a final question was asked and I stood up again to answer, taking a few steps towards the podium. The next thing I remember was getting a bit wobbly. With no pain or any other warning signs, I just fell down. Within those few seconds my *‘little grey cells’* were processing in parallel a number of questions: How do I answer the question? Why am I falling down? What is going on?

I now know that I was having a cardiac arrest. The grim reaper was knocking at my door, giving me the instructions on how to kick the bucket. But somehow, I missed the bucket and was catapulted from St Paul’s Bay in Malta straight up to heaven’s gate where I met St Peter who welcomed me with a nice chilled plum brandy. We started chatting about heaven’s options and the available five-star deluxe accommodation and services. Then, nothingness.

The next thing I remember was excruciating pain trying to move and stand up, with some people pushing me back down. I was wondering why there were so many people around me and why they were ‘torturing’ me?



Guardian Angels in action

Somehow, I realised that I was amongst colleagues and friends. I asked 'Can I have some water please?' But nobody gave me any. I dropped back into disappointment and blackness thinking, 'I should have stayed with St Peter'.

Unbeknownst to me, a number of colleagues rushed forward to start CPR, while others immediately collected the relevant papers from my room, called for an ambulance, informed the hospital, contacted my family and waited for them to arrive to Malta. The hotel staff responded efficiently and medics arrived to take over from the first-responders team – my Guardian Angels, as I like to call them.

Twenty-five minutes later – while the rest of the assembly was waiting, praying or biting their nails – I was taken away on the stretcher the crowd started clapping and cheering my name. I responded with a smile and a thumbs up. The accident & emergency doctor Michael Spiteri who arrived at the scene said to me later 'Milorad, your case was a model of how to do CPR. Vets played a crucial role, together with hotel Dolmen staff, in saving your life'.

Although it was not an elaborate stunt to get everyone's attention and to prove that One Health works in practice, it ended up as a real-life show demonstrating just that: the multidisciplinary Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), started by vets, assisted by the hotel staff, and taken over by the medics from Mater Dei Hospital.



My Guardian Angels & FVE Heroes from left to right

First row: Yael Dotan, Jan Bernardy, Heidi Kellokoski-Kiiskinen, Ira Kallio-Kuijala, Kenelm Lewis, Olivier Jacomot, Eleonor Fredler, Mette Uldahl

Second row: Jason Aldiss, Jane Clark, Lino Vella, Siegfried Moder, Stuart Reid, Maurizio Ferri

United One Health battle



Later on, my hospital Angels – doctors, nurses, and other medical teams – all worked as one to fight for my life. At each step of this ‘*United One Health battle*’, they shared their dilemmas, tests results, rationale for their decisions and risks involved with me. The ‘Mater Dei’ Hospital in Malta is a university teaching hospital, with undergraduate and postgraduate students across many disciplines who communicate to the patients with or without the consultant’s presence. What a humane approach to patient care! After a few weeks, I was discharged from the hospital and reincarnated with an implanted multifunctional device in my body to help my ‘dicky ticker’ to function. As I was still very weak and unfit to travel, I had to stay in the hotel, gradually recovering, while looked after by another Angel in my life – my wonderful wife Sanja. While I was there, I talked at length with the hotel Dolmen management and staff who witnessed my ordeal and joined the battle to save my life. I had time to experience, observe and to confirm, once again, how this truly international team of Maltese, Balkan, Asian and others enjoy working together and treat their guests as friends. I have stayed in many hotels in my life but have rarely seen such a cohesive team of people.

The aftermath: questions in my head

Before the episode, I had known some of my veterinary Guardian Angels very well, some less well, some I did not know at all! So many questions needed answers in my head about my Angels!

Who actually were my guardian Angels? How and why did they come forward to help me when I collapsed? What motivated them? Where did they get the confidence? Were they trained to do so? Had they done it before? How did they organise themselves so quickly (immediately) to work in such a coordinated, persistent and determined way? Had this experience had any impact on them personally on the day and later?

And in particular, can their experience be shared, especially with vets, to help others who find themselves in similar situations?

‘The people involved in these episodes are often forgotten,’ my son Ratko, a final-year student in Clinical Psychology, later told me. ‘The focus is more on the patients and families, but the psychological impact on the helpers can be quite significant, too.’

He and his wife Chelsea, an occupational therapist in a specialist cardiothoracic hospital, advised me for my own benefit take some distance – maybe a month or two – from the traumatic event before I speak to any one in detail and begin to emotionally process.

Processing it all

I contacted my Guardian Angels to get their heads up about this idea and asked them to think if something ‘funny’ happened to them that day or afterwards. (Personally, as a result of their life-saving CPR, I suffered bilateral rib fractures, right side pleural effusion with near collapse of the right lower lobe, atelectatic changes – yet I am eternally grateful to them for the damage they caused!)



I informed them of my intention to write a little story about the episode with their names mentioned but not explaining who did what on the day. I will address them in my story just as 'the Angel' or 'the Angels'. They agreed. I spoke to each of my Guardian Angels separately either on Skype or by telephone and later on in person.

From the Angels' viewpoint: what happened first?

The whole room stood up shocked, silenced, then started whispering, then talking louder and moving towards me in waves which at some point looked and felt chaotic. A few delegates who had personal family experience witnessing and losing their dearest in front of them got a real shock and had to leave the hall immediately. Some, who knew me very well, thought that I was performing a stunt. Yes, it was a plausible thought but this time I did not! The initial hall atmosphere with the crowd was described as surreal. Actually, everyone genuinely wanted to help.

Establishing a pecking order

Within seconds of my collapse, one Angel sprinted to the reception to call A&E whilst others kneeled down around my body. The noise level was getting higher and someone shouted 'defibrillator'. The conference event duty manager on the day, coincidentally from Croatia, ran to the reception. The receptionist, also a qualified nurse, and the reception manager grabbed the bag and all raced back to the hall on the first floor. By that time, the President asked for the hall to be cleared, to leave my Angels do their thing.

One Angel, who happened to have a stethoscope, checked my heartbeat and pulse. They established that I was not breathing and had a frothy mouth, and was slowly turning blue. They ripped open my clothes and started quickly to compress my chest. Angels knew the song 'staying alive' but could not remember the rhythm and music so thought '*F...k it – just press*' and they did. One Angel positioned at my head was offered instantly a handkerchief by another to clear my mouth to prepare me for the kiss of life. They soon set up a routine like on a manufacturing line, alternating between coordinated actions.

Coordinated Press & Kiss show

The Angels' individual minds just focused on what they could do initially, convincing themselves that they would do their best to save me. Intriguingly, they assessed my weight, distance from sternum to heart comparing me with some animals: English Mastiff, Bacon Pig and Small pony of approximately 90 kg weight. Spot on – I weighed 93 kg. However, they realised immediately that my sternum and ribs were softer and easier to compress than the animals. The compression force was adjusted accordingly.

While one Angel checked my pulse (or rather its absence), others took turns in compressing my chest. In a coordinated, orderly way they instructed and advised each other how much force to use. One of the Angels, realising my triple bypass scar, suddenly thought, '*Oh god, he has had a heart surgery, he must have some wires in his sternum, perhaps we need to be gentler*'. Turning around and seeing no signs of



life, the angel then thought '*F...k it – he is already dead; it can only help him!*'.
Extraordinarily logical thinking!

Coordinated enhanced show now with a defibrillator!

Within 5-7 minutes, the bag with a defibrillator was brought to the scene. One Angel opened the bag with absolute confidence (never having done it before) followed the instructions, got a nodding eye contact with others and pressed the button. The defibrillator tells you what to do and gives clear instructions. Everyone focused.

The Press & Kiss & now Shock show continued for another 25-30 minutes with a total of six shocks applied before the medical team arrived.

The medics then took over and before doing so they asked everyone to clear the room. Most left but one Angel stubbornly did not want to leave me with people I did not know – the same Angel who had refused me water earlier on. Once the drugs kicked in, I started showing some signs of life: I started to breathe regularly again, regaining some colour, trying to move my head, legs and arms and understandably yelling in pain.

Actions behind the scenes

Whilst being resuscitated, a few colleagues and friends, together with the designated Hotel staff, rampaged through my room and possessions searching for medications, disease history and passport. By the time the paramedics took me away, they had called my wife Sanja and family in the UK, suggesting her to come to Malta as soon as they could.

The ambulance was followed by one of the Angels being driven by the hotel owner with my relevant medical history and medication. Whilst being pushed on the trolley in the hospital, the Angelic voice that I could recognise meant that there was hope for me. How inspiring, the timing of initiatives and coordinated actions from more than one person!

The Angels' stories

Of the mix of veterinary colleagues – equine vets, large and small animal practitioners, academics, researchers and food safety specialists – a few knew each other well but the majority did not. Some actually had experience, through equine and large animal practice, dealing with emergency situations with many bystanders. A few were trained in CPR, one had done it previously in real life on humans, one had helped but the majority were not trained in human CPR. One Angel always carries a stethoscope just in case – I am glad the equine and farm animal vets did not have a pistol handy!

One Angel was on the way out of the hall with a broken ankle - suddenly heard the voice of the CPR trainer 30 years ago '*If people gather around a lying body don't assume they all know what they are doing – go and help*'. The Angel immediately turned back to the hall to help the rest who had already started compressions, and just joined to the group who appeared to know what they are doing.

Focus on the task at hand



The Angels’ main motivation throughout the event, as few of them said smiling, was *‘to save your... arse Milorad’* – and they did! So, they switched off their emotions to focus on their tasks, their observations of each other and my bodily signs. My irregular agonal deep breaths and rolling eyes, thank god, did not fool them that I was recovering so they continued CPR in the same rhythm. Their veterinary knowledge no doubt helped.

A few misunderstandings were quickly clarified, trust was established, for example, by giving each other advice and encouragement. Between themselves, they quickly established who would do what. Instinctively, everybody was determined to help me and to help each other. When the defibrillator was brought, they shouted almost like one in the hall to reduce the noise. After the defibrillator was switched on, they followed the its clear instructions. Shock – Press – Kiss – repeat. The defibrillator actually reinforced their determination and confidence. Half an hour is a long time.

Hand-over to the human medical team

At one point, some Angels thought that they had lost the battle but the others did not. Most importantly, no one panicked. They continued CPR even when the doctor arrived and asked them to stop. Once the full ambulance crew arrived, it was time to leave the scene. The Angels moved to the corridor to share their hope with everybody else. When I was taken away on the stretcher, the Angels shared their joy with the big crowd in corridor by cheering me on – that really put a smile on my face. It meant a lot to me – and inspired me to fight and survive.

The Angels told me their emotions then went on a roller coaster, no doubt compounded by the amount of ‘liquid’ they consumed during the gala dinner that evening! They shared their feelings with each other and other colleagues at the bar and dinner. Some Angels and delegates were initially shy to laugh, smile and joke considering the near-death experience of the day. Luckily, many friends, who have known me well for many years, reassured them that my wish – whether I was ‘alive or dead’ – was definitely to celebrate my life.

Winding down: the aftermath

The Angels shared their experiences in the days and weeks that followed with their family and friends. One Angel demonstrated the ‘confidence’ at a different event, a few months later, when someone collapsed the Angel literally ran and ‘grabbed’ the defibrillator from the wall, at the same time as the manager who was trained in CPR. They were ready but thankfully they did not need to use it. More than a few FVE colleagues who were in Malta told me that because of what happened, their practice or other vet-related business bought defibrillators.

Some Angels described that they have now ‘a special relationship’ with me, and I feel the same about them. They all said that my first recorded message to FVE from the hospital bed the following morning played with their emotions too; some cried, some smiled and some cried and smiled at the same time when I said that *‘I am not going to kick the bucket yet’*.



Life goes on!

Since then, I've become a proud first-time grandfather in January 2023 to a granddaughter named Iskra ('Spark' in our language). My family and I will never forget that my Guardian Angels & FVE heroes were those who sparked my new life on that fateful day in November 2022. The happiness of now expanded family life is indescribable.

Happy and grateful to be alive to share this wonderful 'One Health' story about wonderful colleagues, friends and people.

Milorad Radakovic



Thank you all



and cheers with  branded whiskey, given to me in 2003, signed by many UK colleagues and friends.

This was the 'first drop in my new life' shared with my close family on my return to UK on 27 December 2022.

Some reflections

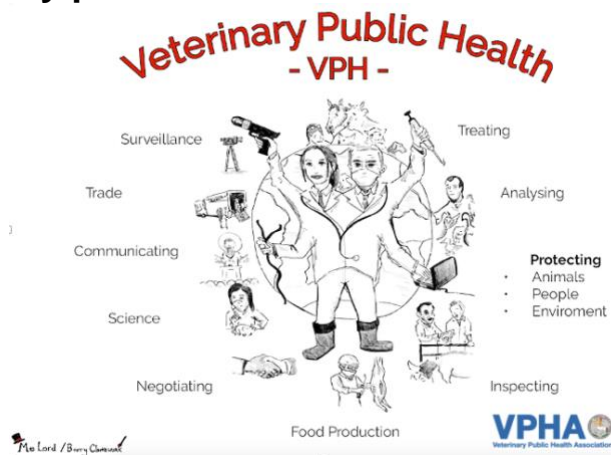
from my Guardian Angels & FVE heroes and me

If one is faced with a situation to carry out CPR on people:

- 1) **DO HAVE CONFIDENCE:** Veterinarians know how to carry out CPR although they may need a refresher to build up their confidence.
- 2) **DO COMPRESSION:** Start and Press hard immediately. Carry on until medics arrive. An occasional deep breath or eye rolling are not signs of recovery.
- 3) **DO SHOCKS:** The defibrillator tells you what to do. Don't be scared to use and apply. Many electrical shocks can be applied. These don't hurt.
- 4) **DO KEEP GOING:** It is hard work but very rewarding to be stubborn, especially if a life can be saved.



My presentation on One Health



During my presentation, I used a few illustrations to get my messages across, like the one with a two-headed, four-armed veterinarian, adept at multi-tasking.

In one hand, they hold an injection to treat animals, in another hand, a pistol, just in case, to euthanise – humanely kill – animals. A third hand enters data on a laptop and the fourth holds a rope, to

restrain animals and not get injured. The stethoscope around the neck can be used as part of the clinical examination – or to confirm whether or not an animal is alive.

These kind of images are very helpful in explaining to people the wide-range of veterinary tasks. Indeed, for those who don't know, in addition to their well-known clinical work (examining, diagnosing and treating animals), veterinarians also carry out other tasks such as veterinary inspections of farms, animals before & after slaughter for fresh meat production, other food and feed productions such as milk and milk products.



In doing so, vets contribute significantly to food security (quantity, quality and safety), trade in animals and animal products, legislative standards (*No vets - No trade*), surveillance, science, communication and control of animal and zoonotic diseases.



During my presentation, I also stressed that One Health as a subject, contrary to many beliefs, is popular amongst the students.



For example, in the UK, comparable to other countries, we have VPH Ambassadors in each UK Vet School, student-led conferences and similar activities to teach and promote VPH and One Health.