

# Left for Dead

The discovery that a man who had been in a coma for 23 years was still conscious has raised questions over the treatment of people who are in a permanent vegetative state.

“I screamed, but there was nothing to hear,” was the terrifying headline in London’s *Daily Mail* in November. This was not an advertisement for another instalment of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, but a real-life medical story: a Belgian neurologist had discovered that a man living in a nursing home in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) for 23 years had really been conscious. He could hear doctors talking but was completely unable to respond. He had essentially been buried alive.

Rom Houben, a martial artist and engineering student who could speak four languages, was paralysed in a car accident when he was 23. Tests always confirmed that he was a PVS patient.

Somehow Steven Laureys of the Coma Science Group at the University of Liege, Belgium, came into the picture. He gave Houben an MRI scan and found that his brain was only slightly affected.

Now, although Houben is almost completely paralysed, he can move his right hand slightly. This enables him to communicate. With a speech therapist’s help he can spell words out on an on-screen keyboard. He is even writing a book, says Laureys with some satisfaction.

For Dr Laureys this case confirms his theory that many PVS patients are wrongly diagnosed — up to 43% he says in an open-access article in *BMC Neurology*. Tragically, despite many examinations, the doctors had missed it.

“Once someone is stamped as being ‘not conscious,’ it becomes very difficult to get rid of that label,” Laureys says. Furthermore, proper testing takes many hours — hours that medical personnel don’t have, especially if a patient is in a nursing home or at home in the care of relatives.

Admittedly there were some sceptical voices in the chorus of horrified amazement. Art Caplan, a bioethicist from the University of Pennsylvania, felt that the facts just didn’t add up. “The technique of having someone point your finger to a keyboard is called facilitated communication. Sadly, it has been shown time and again to be unreliable. There is something of the ouiji board about the whole thing.”

Furthermore, he says, 23 years in “solitary confinement” must surely have damaged his capacity for communication, but according to press reports he is quite lucid.

Laureys, however, is aware of the ouiji board trap. He asked the speech therapist to leave the room, showed Houben some objects and told him to write them down when she returned.



He passed the test.

Houben had bad doctors, says Laureys, but he admits that testing patients thoroughly is a very difficult job. “Every patient should be tested at least 10 times before he is definitively classified as vegetative,” Laureys says.

There are many problems, apart from testing. Many PVS patients drift in and out of consciousness so the tests might be administered when they are not “at home”. They can also be so drugged with sedatives that they become incapable of responding.

So, should PVS patients be thoroughly and repeatedly tested so that we can say with certainty that no one in a hospital or nursing home is imprisoned in his or her body? Apart from the psychological pain of abandonment and lack of recognition, they might be in physical pain.

Most people would immediately answer “Yes”. A test devised by Laureys is required nowadays in government-run nursing homes in Belgium. But not everyone agrees. If removing the patient’s pain is one option, another is removing the patient.

Julian Savulescu, an Australian who is now a professor of ethics at Oxford, argued this year in the *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* in an article written with a colleague, Guy Kahane, that euthanasia is morally obligatory in such cases: “It is far from obvious that such lives are still worth living. If so, then even if using fMRI we can establish that brain-damaged patients still enjoy phenomenal consciousness and a significant measure of sapience, terminating these patients’ lives might be morally required, not merely permissible.”

Just think of how much money could be saved if euthanasia were ever legalised! Patients who are clearly in a persistent vegetative state would be left to die. And even if there were doubts, their lousy quality of life would mean that there would be no point in testing them.

Rom Houben, however, seems convinced that doctors should pound on the door to see if anyone is home. “I have only my family to thank for my life,” Houben types bitterly on his keyboard. “The others gave up trying to find me.”

Michael Cook is editor of the bioethics newsletter, *BioEdge*.