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Is Anybody In There?

The idea of comas has been one of the least investigated and explored branches of the medical community for decades. Up until recent years, the entire process was thought to be left up to chance whether or not a patient would wake up. However, through breakthroughs in technology, and innovative use of preexisting machines, hope has been renewed for affected patients. According to Jan Claassen and Brian L. Edlow in their article “Some People Who Appear to Be in a Coma May Actually Be Conscious”, when Doctors reviewed the brain activity of patients asked to do basic tasks via functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG), it showed as if they were trying to do the task, but their body was unresponsive. This goes to show that not only are humans still conscious in some sense, but even aware of the events around them whilst comatose.

The common definition of consciousness is recognized as being in a state of awareness, or, for a lack of better words, awake. The word ‘conscious’ itself is an arbitrary and rather vague term for just being awake. With the rapid advancement of technology within the medical industry in just the past 50 years alone, shouldn’t the vocabulary used to diagnose and prescribe change along with it? As our knowledge expands as a species, so should the meanings behind the words we use. As mentioned before in the article, patients displayed (while limited) response to words

spoken to them by researchers. This is called ‘covert consciousness’. During covert consciousness, the brain is in “a state in which [it] reacts to the outside world with some comprehension, although the body does not respond.” With all of this going for it, it becomes easier to understand why consciousness stretches to apply to not just things that are awake, but also to those trapped in comas.

Consciousness as a whole is a very abstract concept, contrary to the Google definition. It’s used not only as a word to describe if someone is awake or not, but it extends to if something is even alive to begin with. It’s been a point of contention in multiple hot button topics like abortion and viruses. The reason behind this is that consciousness can be, and is viewed in multiple different ways by multiple different groups of people. Just being alive doesn’t cut it for some; while for others, you must cherish every living organism as if it were your own child. My own personal theory of consciousness is that any being that is alive, that knows that they are alive, and can understand not only their own existence, but the existence of the world around them, is conscious; However, I digress.

The research behind brain scans, and the topic of comas as a whole is still fresh. Almost every day it feels as if there is breakthrough after breakthrough into a world that we believed to be a death sentence prior. As time goes on, there will undoubtedly be new methods that will allow our species to overcome this massive hurdle that has plagued and eluded us.

Work Cited

Claassen, Jan and Edlow, Brian L. "Some People Who Appear to Be in a Coma May Actually Be Conscious." *Scientific American*, 1 November 2022,
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