



## Neuro Ethics: Neurological Disorders of Consciousness

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### DESCRIPTION

Neuroethics is the study of the ethics of neuroscience as well as the ethics of neuroscience. The majority of work in neuroethics is focused on neuroscience ethics. It is concerned with the ethical, legal, and social implications of neuroscience, such as how neurotechnology can be used to predict or alter human behavior, as well as the societal implications of our mechanical understanding of brain activity, connecting neuroscientific knowledge with ethical and social considerations.

Concepts surrounding consciousness have been defined and operationalized in clinical neurology in such a way that they create a separate yet complementary matrix for thinking about the challenging difficulties those philosophers have been struggling with for centuries. Neurologists are frequently called upon to assess patients' degrees of consciousness, anticipate outcomes when awareness is lost or impaired, find possibilities for fostering neurorecovery, and coach families on what to expect and how to best prepare for various outcomes. In turn, these assessments and recommendations establish the main axis around which important decisions about the intensity and duration of care that should be provided are determined. Assessments of levels of consciousness and capacities for recovery play a key role in decisions to limit or continue life-sustaining care, demonstrating the importance of consciousness to the concept of personhood and what makes life worthwhile to live. Prolonged use of limited intensive or supportive care resources for patients deemed incapable of further neurological recovery can also generate moral discomfort among healthcare workers. When viewed in this light, the ethical significance of having clarity on how to approach decisions about life-sustaining therapy becomes clear.

As the clinical trial landscape for patients with Disorders of Consciousness (DoC) expands, it is becoming increasingly important to evaluate the associated ethical concerns and opportunities. Responsible research in the vulnerable

population of DoC patients, including those in coma, vegetative state/unresponsive wakefulness syndrome (VS/UWS), Minimally Conscious State (MCS), Covert Cortical Processing (CCP), and Cognitive Motor Dissociation (CMD), necessitates proactive consideration of unique ethical issues that may arise, as well as the adoption of robust safeguards to protect patients, surrogates, and other key stakeholders.

The neuroscientific and philosophical investigation into the substance and bounds of consciousness have foreshadowed contemporary arguments at the crossroads of neurology and consciousness ethics. While these lines of inquiry, neuroscientific and philosophical, have generally proceeded in isolation from one another, their ultimate epistemic goals are shared, and significant insights can be acquired by studying how crucial findings from one discipline might effectively enrich the other. Integration of philosophical and neuroscientific findings is especially important now that conceptual issues and ethical quandaries are becoming more widespread and consequential in clinical practice and research.

### CONCLUSION

Neuroethical issues highlighted by recent improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of consciousness disorders are fast developing, becoming increasingly significant, and remaining unexplored. The goal of this thematic review is to provide a clinically applicable framework for understanding the current taxonomy of consciousness disorders, as well as to propose a method for identifying and critically evaluating actionable neuroethical issues that arise frequently in research and clinical care for this vulnerable population. Increased awareness of these issues, as well as clarity on opportunities for optimizing ethically responsible care in this domain, is especially timely in light of recent worldwide increases in critically ill patients with prolonged disorders of consciousness associated with coronavirus disease in 2019.

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