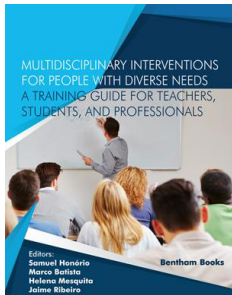


Disorders of Consciousness



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Abstract ☰

Preview this chapter:

A disorder of consciousness (DoC) is a state where consciousness has been affected by damage to the brain. DoC range in the form of a hierarchy, including coma, vegetative state and minimally conscious state. The most common way to assess consciousness is to observe their responses to stimulation. However, observing these responses and detecting purposeful behaviours is extremely challenging. Several studies have shown that misdiagnosis is common. It is crucial to optimise the way consciousness assessments are performed. Clinical management of DoC patients, from treatment of pain to end-of-life decisions, depends on behavioural observations. In the present chapter, we review the challenges posed by the assessment of consciousness and the importance of combining clinical assessment with complementary methods of assessment, such as positron emission tomography, functional magnetic resonance imaging and electroencephalography. According to the diagnosis established, the patient will follow different care pathways. Although therapeutic options of DoC are still limited, basic therapies include artificial nutrition and hydration, physical and occupational therapies as well as sensory stimulation. Pharmacologic trials, deep brain stimulation and multisensory stimulations are some of the therapeutic options for DoCs. Recently, it was removed the requirement to obtain legal sanction for every decision to withdraw clinically assisted nutrition and hydration from people in DoCs. This has led to an entire paradigm shift, from a focus on the diagnosis to a focus on the patient’s best interest. Although these decisions will spare the courts’ involvement, one should never disregard reaching a correct diagnosis for this vulnerable population.

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