

Ethics after Hours



Coma

Documentary

This documentary follows four patients at the Center for Head Injuries at the JFK Medical Center in Edison, N.J. who have suffered severe brain trauma after having been in an accident. We meet the four patients, Al’Khan, Sean, Tom and Roxanne, after they have emerged from coma into either a vegetative state (awake but not aware) or a state of minimal consciousness wherein the doctors aren’t sure just how conscious they actually are. The documentary illustrates the frustrations of patients as they try to understand or make themselves understood, the concerns of the health care teams when they don’t see improvement in the patients over time, and the struggles of families as they try to understand and come to terms with the fact that their loved one may never recover beyond a vegetative state or a state of minimal consciousness.

Director: Liz Garbus

Executive Producer: Sheila Nevins

Released: 2007

Available on Crave TV

Duration: 1 hours 42 Mins.

Discussion questions:

- Roxanne’s mother decides to take Roxanne out of the hospital and look after her at home. Why did you think she made this decision?
- From an ethical perspective do you have concerns with Dr McCagg’s personal investment in her patient Al’Khan and his family? Why/why not?
- Driving to the wake, Dr. McCagg reflects on her role in Al’Khan’s treatment. How do you think she handled the situation where she had to break bad news to the family?
- Why do you think Tom’s parents and fiancé reacted with so much frustration in the consultation with the hearing expert?
- Reflect on how the medical team and the family members talk to the patients before and after they are confirmed to be beyond the state of minimal consciousness.
- Sean’s dad expresses a lot of frustration during the consultation with the health care team and asks them, “Are we are giving up on Sean?” What did you think of the doctors’ and the team’s response to this question?
- Sean’s mother says, “Sean has to get better – I mean better than this – this is just an unacceptable state to be in.” Why do you think it is so difficult for families of patients who don’t recover beyond a vegetative state to accept this situation?