

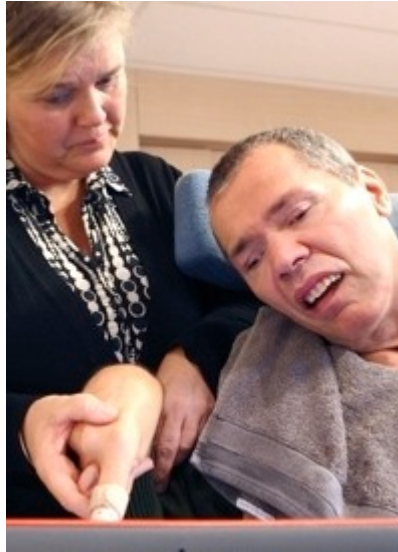


Written by [Ann Shibley](#) on November 24, 2009

Coma Patient Comes Alive

Wrongly diagnosed as being in a coma and vegetative state for 23 years, a man who was actually conscious but trapped in his own paralyzed body was incredibly given a “second birth” as he describes it.

Rom Houben was studying to be an engineer in Belgium at the age of 23 when he was involved in a car accident. At the time, 23 years ago, his doctors used an accepted standard for medical evaluation to assess eye, verbal, and motor responses known as the Glasgow Coma Scale. The repeated conclusion was that his consciousness was “extinct.”



Houben has since related, “I screamed but there was nothing to hear.” Describing the horrifying time spent alone while others thought him to be dead he says:

All that time I literally dreamed of a better life. Frustration is too small a word to describe what I felt.

I shall never forget the day when they discovered what was truly wrong with me — it was my second birth.

I want to read, talk with my friends via the computer, and enjoy life now people know I am not dead.

Three years ago, a neurological specialist, [Dr. Steven Laureys who is head of the Coma Science Group, took another look at Houben’s case](#). “Medical advances caught up with him,” said Dr. Laureys. Using state of the art imaging, Dr. Laureys discovered that although Houben lost control of his body, he was very well aware of what was going on in his surroundings, with brain function almost completely normal.

“Anyone who bears the stamp of ‘unconscious’ just one time hardly ever gets rid of it again,” commented Dr. Laureys. And that’s what has him worried. The Houben case will be held up by Laureys as an example for similarly-diagnosed cases around the world:

In Germany alone each year some 100,000 people suffer from severe traumatic brain injury.

About 20,000 are followed by a coma of three weeks or longer. Some of them die, others regain health.

But an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people a year, remain trapped in an intermediate stage: they go on living without ever coming back again.

The pro-assisted suicide/euthanasia crowd might take this exciting news as somewhat of a setback. The diagnoses of doctors in such difficult cases no longer holds the weight they used to. The line between vegetative coma and non-responsive paralyzed patients is apparently less demarcated than what has been relied upon in very recent standard medical deductions.



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Fortunately, there was no rush to serious action in the Rom Houben case. However with a repeated diagnosis of a vegetative state, Houben could easily have become a victim of euthanasia with life supports removed, as the courts ordered for the clearly responsive Terri Schiavo.

For now, Rom Houben will continue to live his life out at a hospital. But with his computer that he uses to tap out messages in order to communicate, and a special device that lets him read books while lying down, Houben is joyfully alive.

Photo: AP Images



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