

Permanent vegetative state

ADDENDUM TO A REVIEW BY A WORKING GROUP CONVENED BY THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND ENDORSED BY THE CONFERENCE OF MEDICAL ROYAL COLLEGES¹

In 1994 The House of Lords Select Committee on Medical Ethics recommended that permanent vegetative state (PVS) should be defined and a code of practice developed relating to its management¹. The Royal College of Physicians of London convened a working party which reported in 1996². Shortly after this report was published an article appeared in the *British Medical Journal* suggesting that PVS was not infrequently misdiagnosed³. The working party met Dr Keith Andrews, the principal author of this paper to discuss whether the working party's recommendations should be altered in the light of his findings.

The working party concluded that further emphasis should be given to the following points in its report:

1. **'Re-assessment:** It is to be emphasised that there is no urgency in making the diagnosis of PVS. If there is any uncertainty in the mind of the assessor then the diagnosis shall not be made and a re-assessment undertaken after a further time has elapsed.'
2. **'Examination:** . . . It is important that the assessors shall take into account the descriptions and accounts given by relatives, carers and nursing staff who spend most time with the patient.'

The examining physician will rarely have sufficient time to monitor the patient carefully throughout the day, so information from paramedical staff, carers and family is of great importance in assessing the potential responsiveness of the patient. Since it has been suggested that the patient's position may affect responsiveness, patients should be assessed in different positions and should be managed in an environment that is stimulating, comforting and most suitable for their needs.

Apart from emphasising and fleshing out these points, the Working Party saw no reason to modify its report¹.

References

- 1 House of Lords. *Report of the Select Committee on Medical Ethics*. Session 1993-4. London, HMSO, 1994, (HL Paper 21-1).
- 2 The permanent vegetative state. Report by a working group convened by the Royal College of Physicians and endorsed by the Conference of Medical Royal Colleges and their Faculties of the United Kingdom. *J R Coll Physicians Lond* 1996;**30**:119-21.
- 3 Andrews K, Murphy L, Munday R, Littlewood C. Misdiagnosis of persistent vegetative state. *Br Med J* 1996;**313**:13-6.

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