

Cognitive Biases in Health Care



SITUATION: The term “bias” typically refers to a negative attitude, of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group. Psychologists often define bias broadly as “the negative evaluation of one group and its members relative to another.” This unconscious prejudice raise serious concerns in health care. It can have a profound impact on the experience of patients and their families and, ultimately, on health outcomes. Moreover, underreporting of bias leads to a lack of awareness and ability to address the issue.



BACKGROUND: Human beings have inherent biases based on culture, upbringing, personal experiences and beliefs. These biases can influence the care that is provided to a patient, often unconsciously, as well as in the way providers interact with patients and their families. In health care’s fast-paced environment, providers must make quick decisions, relying on their inherent knowledge. Biases can cloud that knowledge without the provider even realizing it is occurring.



ASSESSMENT:

- 1) Biases may be underestimated or overlooked as root causes in safety events.
- 2) Multiple biases are present subconsciously and can manifest individually or in combinations.
- 3) Recognizing and addressing biases proactively can help prevent disappointing outcomes and experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Educate your team to recognize biases within themselves and their peers. This will build awareness of the types of biases that occur and help to eliminate them. Implicit association tests, many of which can be found online, are an effective tool for helping individuals understand their subconscious biases and actively work to challenge them.
- Promote a culture that embraces diversity and makes it safe for individuals to speak up if bias is observed in others.
- Review ASHRM white papers on this topic at [ASHRM.org](https://www.ashrm.org).
- Work to reduce language barriers, which are one of the main cognitive disparities in health care but which are often downplayed or ignored. The risk of not communicating effectively can lead to an adverse event occurring.

Resources:

The Joint Commission. (2016, October). Cognitive biases in health care. Quick Safety, 28. https://www.jointcommission.org/-/media/tjc/documents/newsletters/quick_safety_issue_28_oct_2016pdf.pdf

Fischer-Sanchez, D., Huben-Kearney, A., Wertheimer, M., & Wilburn, B. (2021). *Recognizing and managing bias in the ambulatory health care setting*. American Society for Health Care Risk Management. <https://www.ashrm.org/ashrm-diversity-white-paper>