Cognitive bias is a crucial factor in nurses’ decision making

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Eoin D O’Sullivan

Correspondence to: Dr Eoin D O’Sullivan, Kidney Health Service, Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia; eoidosullivan@gmail.com

Commentary

Nursing decision density is high so it is likely that over hundreds of clinical decisions made each day, bias will impact almost all nurses’ practice.¹ Thus, it is not surprising that nurses face the same cognitive challenges as other decision makers in healthcare. In the absence of robust data on debiasing strategies, it is worth reflecting on factors which increase the chances of a cognitive bias occurring—fatigue, lack of experience, decision fatigue, stress and distractors. An uncomfortably familiar list for many clinical staff, yet crucial to remember the real factors that can be tackled today while we wait for the research of tomorrow.

The authors uncover a lack of real-world experimental design, highlighting key challenges in the field. It is difficult to study the nature of thoughts in real time, records of clinical decision making are often incomplete, missing context and inscrutable shadows of the decision in question. Further, decision-makers are highly heterogeneous and inconsistent as a group, even on the same shift. Hence, interventional studies have tended to be of smaller groups with synthetic patient data, ad hoc interventions with non-generalisable outcomes.²

Educational interventions can be effective for example, but it is unclear what form they should take. Should they be integrated into undergraduate teaching or discrete modules later? How context specific should they be? Should they involve real-world patients? Do we need updates and refresher teaching? How do we measure their impact? These important questions highlight our uncertainties surrounding even the simplest of interventions.

Despite the dearth of interventions highlighted by the authors, it is important to remember Carl Sagan’s aphorism, ‘the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.’ This is key area of clinical research which demands pragmatic and thoughtful experimental design to meet the knowledge gap the authors have identified. Future work would benefit from a multidisciplinary approach as it is likely that much value can be brought by psychologists, human factors experts, the wider healthcare team and patients.

Twitter Eoin D O’Sullivan @eoinrenal

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ORCID iD
Eoin D O’Sullivan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7709-6595

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