

Challenging personal borders: improving nursing decisions by understanding cognitive error

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Everyone has judgements: opinions about right and wrong, religion and politics have been fundamental to society. There are also a number of judgements, both conscious and unconscious, that occur in clinical practice: the reliability of clinical signs, feelings about different patient groups, perceived value and appropriateness of treatments, degree of patient contribution to their illness, and so on. Effective emergency care depends on accurate and timely clinical decisions. Emergency nurses play a key role in emergency care and frequently make complex decisions that directly influence patient outcomes.

However, there are a number of features that are unique to the emergency department clinicians that increase risk of decision error. Emergency nurses make an extraordinarily high number of decisions that often occur under conditions of uncertainty, with little or unreliable information. Patients are usually unknown to staff, making informed decision making difficult, patient acuity and duration of emergency care can be highly variable, and care is often fragmented.¹⁻³ Information overload, distractions and interruptions require emergency nurses to traverse large amounts of irrelevant information in order to make sound decisions.¹⁻³ Diagnostic uncertainty adds a further dimension to decision complexity as many patients present to the ED with non-specific complaints. Finally there are inherent human biases in decision making and emergency nurses may be unaware of their biases or underestimate the effect of their biases on decision accuracy. Well known sources of bias resulting in cognitive errors include emotions, moral judgements, preconceived ideas, past experiences, premature decision making, over or under-estimation of disease prevalence, and influence of patient characteristics such as age, gender and diagnostic group.⁴⁻⁵ In this paper decision complexity in emergency nursing will be discussed, sources of decision error in emergency nursing will be explored with a specific focus on cognitive bias and strategies to improve decision making by recognition of bias and sources of decision error will be considered.

Key Words

decision making, emergency nursing, cognitive bias, decision error

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