

Awareness of biases is key to better health care decisions, says GSA

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Recognizing Hidden Traps in Health Care Decision Making



Credit: The Gerontological Society of America

The Gerontological Society of America—the nation's largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to the field of aging—has expanded its Communicating with Older Adults publication series with

the release of ["Recognizing Hidden Traps in Health Care Decision Making."](#)

This unique guide offers solutions to overcoming two specific obstacles that could impede optimal health outcomes: common heuristics, described as mental shortcuts or "rules of thumb," and cognitive biases, which are predictable systematic errors in reasoning.

"The heuristics and biases outlined in the report are very common—we all use them," said Jake Harwood, PhD, chair of the advisory board that oversaw the new publication's development. "Sometimes they are functional, but a lot of the time they lead to poor decision making. What's great about the report is that it raises awareness of these shortcuts, and awareness is a great way of improving decision making."

Select heuristics and biases are illustrated in hypothetical cases involving the use of nonprescription analgesics and the need for recommended immunizations. Each case includes communication tips for overcoming the heuristic or bias. The objective is to encourage more productive decision-making conversations with [older adults](#).

One example provided is that of the anchoring effect, where people may use an initial piece of information (the anchor) to influence subsequent judgments. If a physician has previously instructed a patient to take a certain dosage of a medication, the patient may feel it is safe to use the same dosage to treat any future condition. However, when using nonprescription analgesics, it is important to follow the directions for use on the medication label; exceeding the recommended dosage can lead to serious adverse effects, particularly among older adults.

Harwood added that when people notice that they are using a bias, they can correct for it, and make a better decision.

"Everyone involved in health care [decision making](#)—including patients, providers, and caregivers—benefits from being aware of these shortcuts. I'm not aware of any other publication that describes these issues in such an accessible manner for the health care context," Harwood said.

This new publication is intended for physicians, physician assistants, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists, social workers, and other [health care](#) practitioners who seek to have the best possible interactions with older patients.

"Recognizing Hidden Traps in Health Care Decision Making" was developed by GSA with support from McNeil Consumer Healthcare. It can be accessed for free at <http://www.geron.org/cwoa>.

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