

# Executive Director Report: Cultural Competency



WASHINGTON  
**Medical  
Commission**  
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In *Conversations in Cultural Competency's* blog post on March 15, 2018, the author discusses unconscious bias and its impact in healthcare settings. The author explains that our brains process information quickly to allow us to make decisions and take actions, and a majority of this processing takes place in the background, so you don't have to think about most of your actions. For example, you probably don't consciously think about walking across a room to answer a phone.

Unconscious (or implicit) bias occurs when this automatic processing is influenced by stereotypes, which in turn, impact your actions and judgments. A stereotype can be a belief that associates a group of people with certain traits or characteristics or a pre-judgement of a person based on a group they may be associated with, and tend to be fixed and oversimplified images or ideas.

We have all been exposed to messages that define groups of people throughout our life and careers and these messages are repeated by media, teachers, family members and other influencers. Once these messages are internalized, these stereotypes shape our thoughts and actions. And while you may think that you have no prejudice, research indicates that unconscious bias shapes us all.

Unconscious bias can lead to negative outcomes for minority groups in healthcare settings, which contributes to health disparities and a real difference in the access to adequate healthcare. While health disparities are often seen as a racial or ethnic issue, there are many other factors on which unconscious bias is based, such as:

- Sex
- Sexual identity
- Socioeconomic status
- Education level
- Age
- Disability
- Geographic location

To overcome unconscious bias, first you must acknowledge that it exists and no one is immune from its influence. Once acknowledged, you can take steps to control it by recognizing stereotypical thoughts as they occur and discounting them. Instead of relying on assumptions, you train yourself to focus on the individual as your primary source of information.

Strategies to overcome unconscious bias:

1. Recognize stereotypical thinking
2. Replace biases and assumptions
3. Understand the individual
4. Explore a new perspective
5. Increase opportunity for positive contact

Bedford, Megan, "[Unconscious Bias in Healthcare.](#)"  
*Conversations in Cultural Competency*, 15 March 2018

