Nursing Strategies for Overcoming Implicit Bias

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Nurses do not always like their patients; sometimes patients (or diseases) are scary, upsetting or just unfamiliar. Patients can be rude. Sometimes nurses recognize their own biases and other times they do not. As a professional it is important that nurses be able to fulfill their obligations to patients in spite of their biases. Sometimes, overcoming bias is a matter of moral strain--trying harder. However, moral strain cannot adequately address problems associated with implicit bias. Implicit bias presents a special problem because the person is unaware of the need to exert moral strain. Even when there is awareness of bias, it is difficult to overcome predispositions in hurried, messy, or, otherwise difficult situations. More effective self-control can be an outcome of personal policies which limit the opportunities to misbehave. This essay contributes to a growing literature on the need for procedural mechanisms of self-control to avoid implicit bias. State laws, codes of ethics, hospital policies, and guidelines offer some procedural mechanisms for control. However, the hallmark of professional work is self-regulation; it is vital that nurses have strategies to regulate their own behavior. Effective and ethical nursing involves learning to recognize and control personal feelings about patients.