



BCSLS “Under the Microscope” Enewsletter, December 2022

The Social Determinants of Health and What Lab Can Do To Make the Patient Experience Better

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Shortages in the lab have been the most forefront issue we as lab professionals have seen in the last two years and let's face it most of us are burned out, extremely fatigued, frustrated and the list could continue. When I say shortage, the first idea that construes in your mind is probably staffing levels and yes this is something that is definitely a struggle but we experience more than just staffing shortages, we deal with shortages of equipment, reagents and budgets and this list could also continue. I want to ask, what has all this done to you emotionally and perhaps physically? Has this created barriers in your personal life? Have the shortages not affected you at all? Now that I have asked you some questions keep the emotion and thoughts you have in your mind as I pave a path towards the social determinants of health.

As a high level overview, the social determinants of health refer to a specific group of social and economic factors within a broader social construct that relates to an individual's place in society such as income, education and employment and these are just part of the 50% of what makes the social determinants of health. 25% is the health care system in which we work and the remaining 25% is our genetic make-up and our surrounding environments. As health care workers the social determinants of health directly affect our patients and even ourselves and although you might be thinking that as lab professionals we don't have the ability to change anything, which in a sense we do not but in another sense we can be a strong driving force to lower the impacts patients struggle with every day to put their health as a priority.

A large portion of the problem is health inequalities and finding the balance that makes it better for everyone and their own needs, we need to stop thinking that providing an equal opportunity for everyone is the solution when in fact it is not. We need to start providing health equity which simply means removing unfair systems that cause inequalities. One way lab professionals can help with social determinants is to make sure people get access to the same opportunities and limit barriers to those opportunities. This leads me into something called unconscious bias or implicit bias. Unconscious bias is described as the relations or attitudes that unknowingly alter our observations and therefore often go unrecognized. Those who normally are affected by



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implicit bias are, minority ethnic populations, immigrants, people who earn a low-income salaries, low health-literacy individuals, sexual minorities, children and women, the elderly, the mentally ill, overweight individuals and the disabled. As health care workers we have an unintentional “disconnect” between our desire to provide equal treatment and the way our decision making is influenced by the patients’ race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other social group traits all of which are tenets of disparity.

To help mitigate implicit bias we can look at five strategies.

1. Personal Awareness: Tap into our personal compass that helps is recognize acceptable and unacceptable attitudes and behaviors to keep us guided on the right path.
2. Acknowledgement: We must acknowledge that implicit bias exists.
3. Empathy: We must be able to empathize with each of our patients, put ourselves into their shoes and see their point of view. Many of us naturally do this, but an example of where this may not be the case is patients who participate in risk-taking behaviors which result in adverse health outcomes can make it more difficult for a caregiver to be empathetic, and reusing to acknowledge this emotional necessity can produce negative outcomes during patient interactions and care.
4. Advocacy: Support all patients within the complex health care system
5. Education: Take enhance knowledge courses in unconscious bias or even educate other health care workers about implicit bias and make them aware of it

(There is an interesting test in which you can do to see if you have implicit bias, you can do a google search: Harvard Implicit Association Test)

Returning back to the questions I asked regarding the shortages we face daily and the emotional toll this may have on you as a health care worker, I would like to correlate that with those individuals who have shortages to health care. A large problem society faces is access to health care, especially those in more remote areas. So taking what emotions or thoughts I probed from you, I am hoping that we can think of the same emotional toll this has on our patients in the shortages they may face when it comes to advocating for their own health care.

Health care workers have a powerful force to make an impact on health of others by improving the quality of care we provide and part of improving this care is taking the steps to address the social determinants of health and health equity.