



Countering implicit bias in risk investigations

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In general, it's probably a good idea to not take legal advice solely from webinars.

We do hope this conversation will spur ideas and questions that you can return to your legal team with.

Objectives



Define implicit bias and explain how it differs from explicit bias.



Identify how implicit bias can influence decision-making in risk investigations



Share best practices for conducting unbiased risk investigations



Highlight the importance of diversity and inclusion in investigative teams to mitigate bias.



What Is Bias?

- A tendency or inclination that affects impartial judgment.
 - **Implicit bias:** unconscious attitudes/stereotypes that influence decisions unknowingly.
 - **Explicit bias:** conscious beliefs or attitudes toward a group or individual.
- Both types can influence patient care, teamwork, and decision-making.

Implicit vs. Explicit Bias

Implicit Bias	Explicit Bias
Unconscious	Conscious
Involuntary	Voluntary
Can conflict with stated values	Aligns with beliefs
Measured through indirect tests (e.g., IAT)	Expressed verbally or behaviorally

Bias as a Risk to Healthcare Organizations

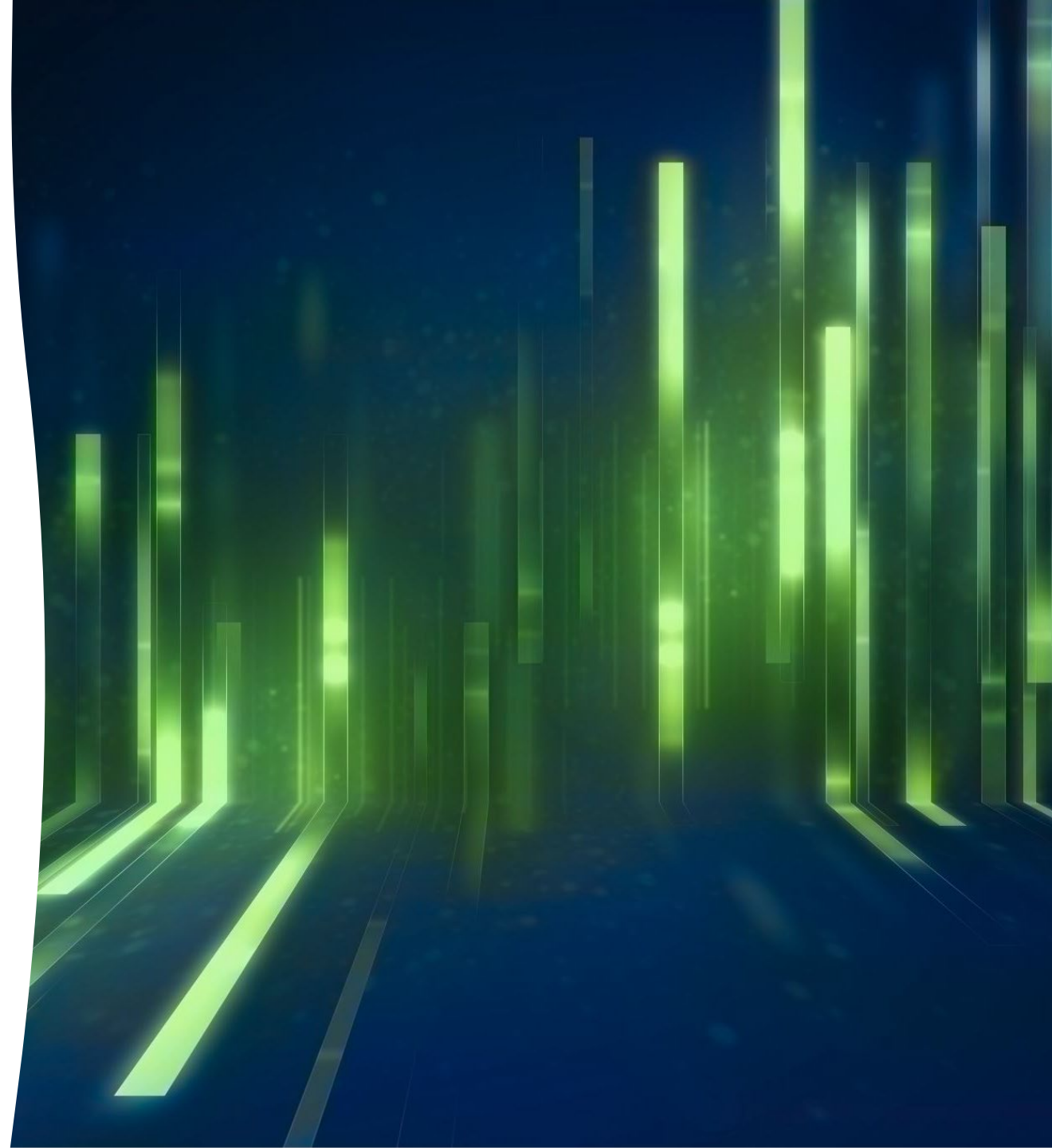
Patient harm and inequitable care

Increased liability and legal exposure

Damage to trust and reputation

Staff morale and retention issues

Undermining just culture and safety reporting



Bias and Event Investigations



Bias can influence:

Root cause analysis (RCA) objectivity

Interviewing witnesses or patients
(tone, questions, assumptions)

**Determining causation and
accountability**



Implicit bias may lead to:

Overlooking systemic issues

Misattributing blame to individuals

Minimizing patient safety concerns
from marginalized groups

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Bias and Decision-Making

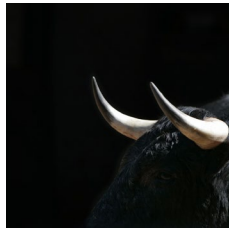
How Implicit Bias Influences Decision Making



Anchoring Bias

Tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information offered when you are making decisions

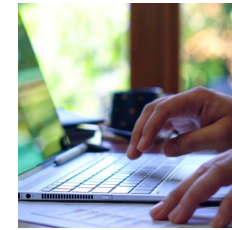
Basing investigation solely on what written on incident report



Horn Effect

Focus on a negative feature of a person that clouds professional judgment

“Frequent flyer,” “drug seeking,”
“impaired”



Documentation –

Negative language (“refused,” “difficult,” “agitated”) in narrative of incident report

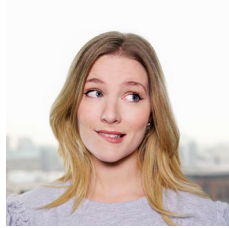
How Implicit Bias Influences Decision Making



Halo Effect

Focus on particularly positive features about a person that clouds clinical or professional judgment

“One of our best So how could they do/be wrong”



Hindsight Bias

After the event, risk management professional knows the outcome so reconstruct as being predictable/preventable

“How could this (event) have happened?” “What were you thinking?”



Professional Hierarchy

Giving more credibility to testimonies from certain staff members over others



Best Practices

Why Bias Mitigation Matters in Investigations

- Investigations must be **objective, fair, and comprehensive**.
- **Biases—especially implicit ones—can distort** findings and lead to ineffective or inequitable corrective actions.
- Unchecked bias:
 - Skews root cause identification
 - Undermines credibility of process
 - Perpetuates systemic harm



Practice Self-Awareness and Reflective Inquiry

- **Acknowledge potential for bias** in every investigation.
- Use **structured reflection tools** to assess assumptions.
- Ask yourself:
 - “Whose voice is missing?”
 - “Am I interpreting this behavior objectively?”
- Complete **bias-awareness or cultural humility training**.



Design Bias-Resistant Investigation Processes

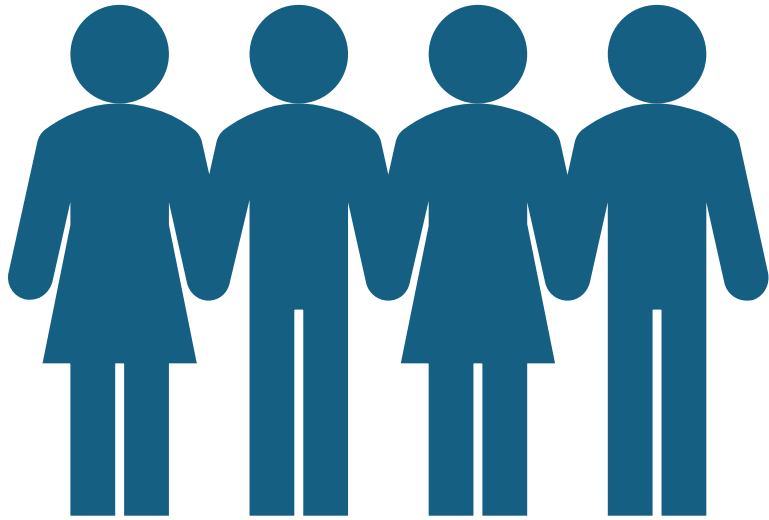
- Use **standardized tools** (e.g., RCA templates, cause mapping) to reduce subjectivity.
- Include **diverse investigation teams**:
 - Roles, disciplines, perspectives
- Rotate leadership or facilitation roles to **avoid hierarchy bias**.
- Create **psychological safety** for open dialogue.



Build Systems That Support Equity and Objectivity

- Embed **equity-focused frameworks** (e.g., ASHRM Equity of Care Assessment).
- Train staff in **trauma-informed communication** for interviews.
- Track investigation data by **demographics** to identify patterns of disparity.
- Establish feedback loops to **learn from missed opportunities**.

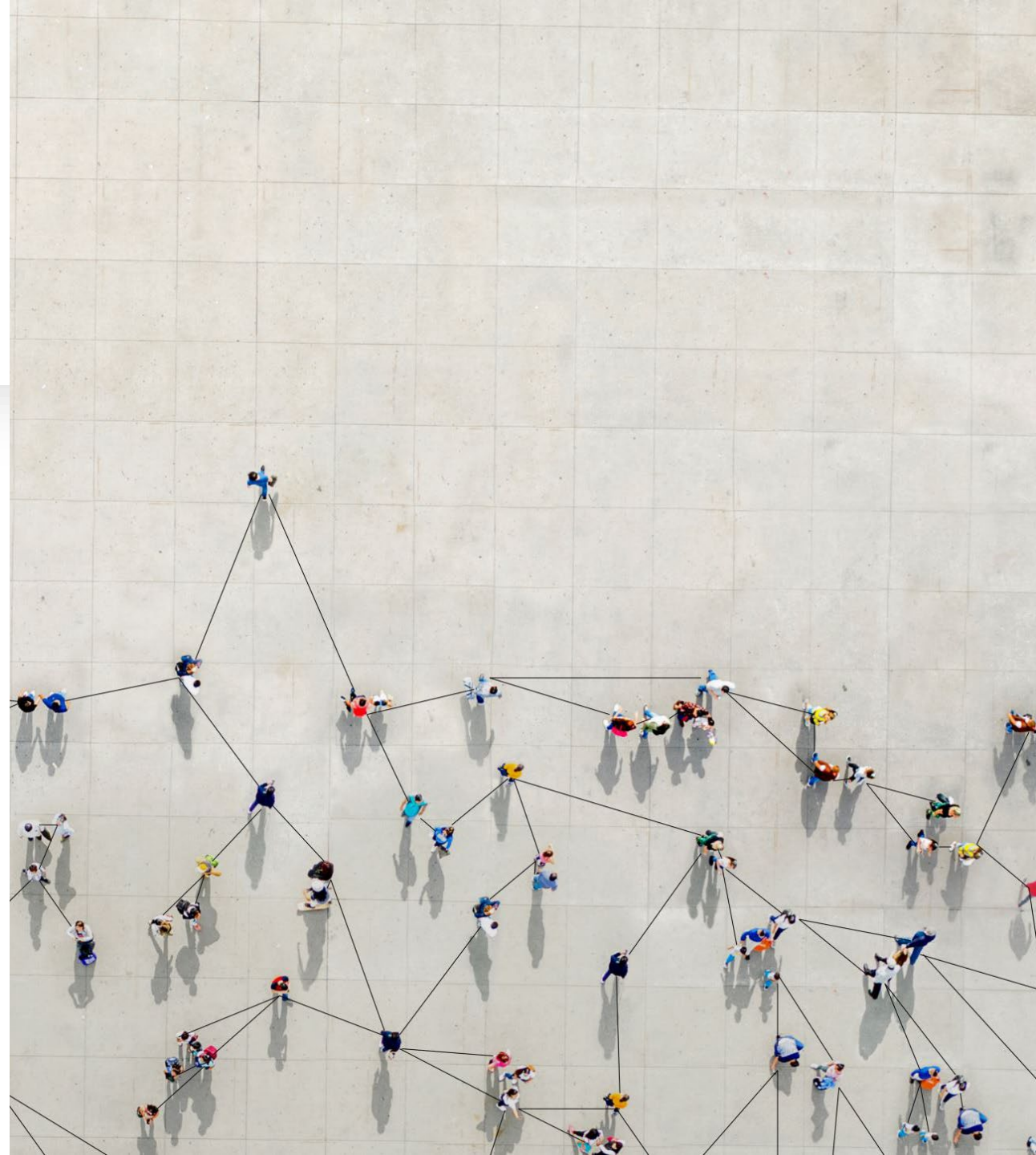




Team Diversity

Diversity/Inclusion on Investigative Teams

- Broader Perspectives
 - Diverse team - different backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints.
- Cultural Intelligence
 - Inclusive teams better equipped to understand cultural nuances
- Bias Reduction
 - Diverse teams reduce risk of unconscious biases, which effect decision making and investigations



Diversity/Inclusion on Investigative Teams

- Enhanced Problem Solving
 - Inclusion encourages team members to share ideas openly
- Trust and Accountability
 - Patients and staff more likely to trust and engage in investigation processes when representation and inclusion on team



Hot Off The Presses...

A new article on the topic was just published:

[Investigators are human too: outcome bias and perceptions of individual culpability in patient safety incident investigations | BMJ Quality & Safety](#)



References/Resources

- Huben-Kearney, A., Fischer-Sanchez, D., Wilburn, B. 2024
AHA/ASHRM White Paper [White Paper: Recognizing and Managing Bias in Digital Health | ASHRM](#)
- Fischer-Sanchez, D., Huben-Kearney, A., Wertheimer, M., Wilburn, B. 2021. [White Paper: Recognizing and Managing Bias in the Ambulatory Health Care/Outpatient Setting | ASHRM](#)
- Huben-Kearney, A., Fischer-Sanchez, D., Wertheimer, M., Wilburn, B. 2023. [White Paper: Recognizing and Managing Bias in the Inpatient Health Care Setting | ASHRM](#)
[White Paper: Recognizing and Managing Bias in the Inpatient Health Care Setting | ASHRM](#)

Thank you

Questions?

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