

Decision-making can be clouded by personal opinion, says Nicola Davies

FOCUS ON THE FACTS

The emphasis on evidence-based health care means that nurses can be overwhelmed by the information on which they base patient assessments and interventions. More information means that nurses need to be more discriminating and objective in their judgements about the information.

To be objective is to put aside personal feelings and prejudices and instead view the facts of the situation. A clear thinking, objective mind can make decisions and instigate actions quickly and efficiently. These are invaluable skills in an environment where decisions need to be made speedily and with confidence.

The first rule in being objective is to refrain from acting on one's first impulse. All too often, especially when under pressure, people proceed with their first decision, which can often turn out to be wrong. It is also important to allow for personal biases. For example, do you tend to sweep a problem under the carpet and focus only on the positive aspects of a situation?

Considering both the positive and the negative angles can equip an individual to form an accurate, reliable evaluation.

Imagine providing information to a patient to help him or her decide whether to opt for a certain treatment. If you present only the therapeutic value of the

treatment, what is the patient's decision likely to be? Conversely, if you present only the likely side-effects, is his or her decision likely to change? Here are some questions to help you view the question from all perspectives:

- ▶ What is the history of the situation?
- ▶ What information is needed to make an informed decision?
- ▶ Is the information available?
- ▶ Can I test the reliability of the available information?
- ▶ Are my observations correct?
- ▶ Could there be another explanation for this situation?
- ▶ Have I avoided making generalisations?
- ▶ What is influencing my judgement?
- ▶ How can I be certain of the possible outcomes?
- ▶ Am I missing something?

Always be aware that there will be questions specific to the particular situation that you will need to ask yourself to be objective.

Impartiality

Although being objective is inherently difficult, it is a skill that can be developed and improved. Another vital skill is to be able to draw a clear distinction between opinion and fact (see box).

Next time you find yourself in a situation that requires objectivity, consider whether you are being as objective as you could be.

For example, compare the statement that 'patient mortality is inversely proportional to the number and education level of



nurses employed in a hospital', with the proposition that 'introducing competition between services in the NHS is likely to improve quality of care while reducing costs'.

In the first instance, many years of research have consistently shown the truth of the statement, while in the second we know that ideology dominates.

In other words, make it your objective to be objective **NS**

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Wording matters

Words denoting:

Fact	Opinion
Is	Could
Was	May
Find	Suggest
Occurred	Likely
Proved	Plausible
Can	Possibly

RESOURCE FILE

- ▶ **Dictionary of Philosophy**
www.iep.utm.edu/objectiv
- ▶ **Changing Minds**
www.changingminds.org/principles/objectivity.htm