

We Don't See Things As They Are; We See Them As We Are



A distinct characteristic of humans is the extent to which our biases affect our perceptions. The adage, “We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are,” encapsulates this issue well. The effect of context on perception is so strong that we might do well to teach “We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are” in elementary school.

This issue was prominent in a review of surgical treatment options for hidradenitis suppurativa and how those options might be perceived differently by dermatologists versus plastic surgeons. In my training, surgery was viewed as a last resort for hidradenitis. A plastic surgeon may, however, think that for forms of hidradenitis that are amenable to curative surgery, surgery would be a very reasonable first-line treatment option. While we might think surgery would be very appropriate for an obese hidradenitis patient who has not responded to medical treatments, a plastic surgeon, having had extensive experience with the problems of prolonged poor wound healing, might think such a patient would not be a good surgical candidate given that the risks of postprocedure complications could be too high.

To a medical editor, a reasonable corollary to the “we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are” phenomenon is that we should look to gain a broad range of perspectives when writing and when evaluating manuscripts. We would not want to miss the perspective of relevant people who have a different background and set of skills.

Beyond that, whenever we see disagreement or conflict, we need to consider the background context that leads people to

see things from a different perspective than the one we hold. Too often, we may, when viewed from our own perspective, think their position is not sensible and that no agreement could be possible. However, if we consider the background and perspective of those we disagree with, we may come to understand their position and end conflict by being able to reach some kind of mutually acceptable agreement. Moreover, if we continue to try to understand different viewpoints, we may even allow ourselves to change our own perspective for the better.

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