

## Who would ever guess?

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**I**mani cleans offices in the urban hospital in which your practice is located. She immigrated from Kenya several years ago to escape that nation's political strife. She spends her daytime hours as a caretaker for an elderly woman to supplement her income. As a single parent with 2 children, she is lucky to have an aunt living nearby who tends to her children while she is at work. It is obvious that she is doing all she can to juggle her roles as mother and breadwinner.

Despite her responsibilities, she places strong emphasis on maintaining her dentition. Her parents lost their teeth at an early age, and Imani vividly recalls their subsequent struggles. In addition to maintaining her dentition, she desperately wants to close her 5-mm maxillary diastema. There is fremitus of the maxillary incisors as well as absence of 2 lower first molars, with significant attachment loss throughout the dentition. Hers is a classic case of posterior bite collapse, requiring resolution by orthodontic, periodontal, and restorative rehabilitation. You wonder how she will ever afford the complex treatment she needs. Perhaps you should address only the diastema and ignore her other treatment imperatives. Your guess is that she is out of her league from both the time involvement and financial expenditure that her rehabilitation would mandate. Declining to treat her might be your most appropriate option.

Whether we know it or not, each of us harbors attitudes that unconsciously affect the decisions we make. Implicit bias is the penchant toward an involuntary, subconscious preconception. These biases are often concealed to comply with societal or political correctness. They are imperceptible via self-reflection and are often ingrained at an early age. Our implicit biases might pertain to gender, ethnicity, social class, race, or appearance, and they can be amplified by media input or interaction with others. Such stereotyping pervades even those who pride themselves on being impartial and can be directed toward members of our own peer group. Because the biases are subliminal, they can be contrary to our stated beliefs or convictions.<sup>1</sup>

Health professionals are vulnerable to the same subtle biases that affect all human behavior. An interesting study involving physicians explored implicit bias. A male and a female patient with moderate osteoarthritis of both knees visited 33 orthopedic surgeons and 48 family physicians to determine the frequency of the doctors' recommendation for total knee arthroplasty. The patients were matched by identical levels of affliction. Both memorized identical histories of their condition, including severity, medications, degree of dysfunction, etc. Their social and employment status was equated via a scripted narrative delivered to each examiner. The MDs prescribed arthroscopies for 42% of the male patients versus 8% of the females. The odds of an orthopedic surgeon recommending knee arthroplasty for the male patient were 22 times those for the female. The investigators concluded that gender bias was highly likely for the disparity in the treatment recommendations between 2 otherwise identical scenarios.<sup>2</sup>

As orthodontists, we are prone to the same sorts of biases. Do we automatically assume that patients of a certain socioeconomic status will choose one form or extent of therapy over another? Do we inequitably emphasize the benefits of aligner options versus fixed therapy in our treatment presentations? Might something even as minor as a patient's discourtesy to our staff affect the level of our recommendations for treatment?

Much to your surprise, Imani has evolved to be one of your most devoted patients, including her full commitment to the collaborative care she deserves. Evidently that little old lady for whom she cares has a soft spot for her—and a checkbook big enough to cover those dental expenses that Imani will face very soon.

Go figure.

### REFERENCES

1. Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. Understanding implicit bias Available at: <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>. Accessed May 6, 2019.
2. Borkhoff C, Hawker G, Kreder H, Glazier R, Mahomed N, Wright J. The effect of patients' sex on physicians' recommendations for total knee arthroplasty. *CMAJ* 2008;178:681-7.