Cognitive Debiasing

All of human behaviour is driven by decisions – either conscious or unconscious. Much of our daily decision making is unconscious – it happens reflexively in response to particular cues from the environment. Psychologists estimate that 95% of our daily behaviour is under this kind of autonomous control and refer to a brain (unconscious) within a brain (conscious). We are mostly unaware of these decisions and associated behaviours - they are largely made up of heuristics (mental shortcuts) and biases (dispositions to respond in particular ways).

- There is nothing necessarily wrong with being on ‘autopilot. In fact, it would be very difficult to get through the day without it. We don’t need to continually re-invent the wheel for many of the repetitive tasks we do, so automatic, reflexive behaviour generally serves us very well. But occasionally it can let us down.

- Cognitive debiasing is any process that aims to mitigate or undo a tendency of the brain to let us down. A number of different cognitive debiasing strategies exist.

- Debiasing strategies vary according to how much cognitive effort is required to execute them.

- At one end of the spectrum are simple forcing functions that may be designed by you or others (e.g. an Automated Teller Machine does not deliver your cash until you have taken your card back -- this design feature prevents the common error that was experienced with the first generation of ATMs when customers took the cash and left their card in the machine.) The operational design saves the customer from even having to think about the process and protects them against predictable memory lapses.

- At the other end are very deliberate multiple-stage strategies that require (1) monitoring stem 1 intuitive decision making by System 2 analytical thinking (see: Dual Process Theory one-pager) to (2) detect the potential threat of bias, and (3) direct application of specific knowledge (mindware) to counteract the bias (e.g. being aware of vulnerability to the diagnosis momentum bias at handover, detecting it in the person doing the handover, and deliberately re-opening the differential diagnosis to consider other possibilities).

- Cognitive debiasing skills are an important feature of the well-calibrated decision maker. Acquiring them is the first step. The second involves a lifelong commitment to vigilance and surveillance of one’s behaviour: self monitoring, reflection, critical thinking and mindfulness, as well as persistence.