



## Evaluation of Camel Wrestling in Türkiye in Terms of Ethics and Animal Protection Legislation: Aydın, Muğla, İzmir Example

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### ABSTRACT

The legal and ethical dimension of camel wrestling, which has a long history in Türkiye, was evaluated within the framework of the Animal Protection Law No. 5199 and the Regulation of the Federation of Camel Wrestling. A verbal and voluntary survey was conducted with 35 camel breeders in Aydın, İzmir and Muğla provinces of Türkiye where camel wrestling is widely practised. The results of the analysis of the data obtained were presented in tables as averages, frequency distributions and percentages. To the question "What is your reason for participating in camel wrestling?", 45.7% of the participants answered as cultural heritage, 31.4% as entertainment and 22.9% as tradition. To the question "Are animals treated in accordance with animal rights in camel wrestling?" 74.3% of the participants answered "Yes", while 25.7% answered "I don't know". The legal status of this event was evaluated by comparing it with similar animal competitions and fights around the world. The issue was interpreted holistically within the framework determined by the Law No. 5199 on the Protection of Animals in force in Türkiye and from the perspective of animal ethics. It was concluded that the use of animals for show, festival, culture, tradition and folklore does not directly coincide with the "principle of usefulness" and that a special legal regulation is needed.

**Keywords:** Animal sports, animal rights, camel wrestling, ethics in camel wrestling, legal cruelty.

## Türkiye'de Deve Güreşlerinin Etik ve Hayvanları Koruma Mevzuatı Açısından Değerlendirilmesi: Aydın, Muğla, İzmir Örneği

### ÖZET

Türkiye'de köklü bir geçmişe sahip olan deve güreşlerinin hukuki ve etik boyutu, 5199 sayılı Hayvanları Koruma Kanunu ile Deve Güreşleri Federasyonu Yönetmeliği çerçevesinde değerlendirildi. Deve güreşinin yaygın olarak yapıldığı Türkiye'nin Aydın, İzmir ve Muğla illerindeki 35 deve yetiştiricisi ile sözlü ve gönüllülük esasına dayalı olarak anket yapıldı. Elde edilen verilerin analiz sonuçları ortalamalar, frekans dağılımları ve yüzdeler şeklinde tablolarda sunuldu. "Deve güreşine katılma sebebiniz nedir?" sorusuna katılımcıların %45,7'si kültürel miras, %31,4'ü eğlence ve %22,9'u gelenek şeklinde yanıt verdi. "Deve güreşlerinde hayvanlara hayvan haklarına uygun davranılıyor mu?" sorusuna %74,3 oranında "Evet" denirken, %25,7 oranında "Bilmiyorum" yanıtı verildi. Bu etkinliğin hukuki durumu dünyadaki benzer hayvan yarışmaları ve kavgalarıyla karşılaştırılarak değerlendirildi. Konu, Türkiye'de yürürlükte olan 5199 sayılı Hayvanları Koruma Kanunu'nun belirlediği çerçevede ve hayvan etiği perspektifinden bütünsel olarak yorumlandı. Hayvanların gösteri, şenlik, kültür, gelenek ve folklor amacıyla kullanımının «yararlılık ilkesi» ile doğrudan örtüşmediği, özel bir yasal düzenlemeye ihtiyaç duyulduğu sonucuna varıldı.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Deve güreşi, deve güreşinde etik, hayvan hakları, hayvan sporları, yasal zulüm.

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Received Date: 08.10.2023 - Accepted Date: 04.03.2024

DOI: 10.53913/aduveterinary.1372822

## Introduction

The first information about camel wrestling was obtained from Iranian and Mongolian drawings from about 400 years ago in the Gulistan Library based in Tehran (Benton, 1996; Atasoy and Fatma, 2014). Apart from Anatolia, camels are not used for wrestling in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Kenya, Israel, India and Mongolia, especially in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf countries, but generally for racing (Mukasa-Mugerwa, 1981; Arslan, 1997; Çulha, 2012; Kartay, 2019).

The exact date of the beginning of wrestling in Anatolia is not known (Arslan, 1997, 1998; Yılmaz et al., 2014; Güneş, 2016). During the Republican period, camel wrestling in and Aydın was organised for different purposes (Arslan, 1997, 1998; Güneş, 2016). Today, camel wrestling is organised in Aydın, Çanakkale, Denizli, İzmir, Manisa, Muğla, Uşak provinces and their districts and towns.

The first animal protection association in the world was established in England in 1824 under "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals" (Dunlop and Williams, 1996). Human beings are obliged to protect animals with the rights and responsibilities that come with the authority they have. For this purpose, the Universal Declaration of Animal Rights was signed in Paris on October 15, 1978 (Ilgar, 2007). According to Yaşar et al. (2004), the first legal step on animal rights in Turkey, in the process of transition to the European Union, was taken by enacting "Law No. 4934" approved on July 15, 2003 and "Law No. 5199 on the Protection of Animals" on June 24, 2004 (Anonymous, 2004).

As a result of the need for institutional identity and organization of camel wrestling, which continues to exist in the coastal provinces of the Aegean and Mediterranean regions, "Camel Culture and Camel Wrestling Federation (DEĞÜF)" was established in Aydın in 2012 with the merger of eight camel associations. The Federation gained its legal structure as a result of its approval "Aydın Governorship Animal Protection Board" in 2014 (Anonymous, 2015).

## Materials and Methods

The material of the research consisted of data obtained from oral interviews and survey questions on "Animal Rights in Camel Wrestling" with 35 volunteer camel wrestlers in the region where camel wrestling was held in 2019 and 2021, and legal regulations on the subject.

The population of the research consists of Aydın districts (Efeler, İncirliova, Bozdoğan, Germencik, Nazili, Söke) and Denizli (Sarayköy), İzmir (Selçuk) and Muğla (Yatağan) in the Aegean Region, where camel wrestling is frequently performed. Wrestlings, organized by the Camel Wrestling Federation and relevant local governments, starts in October and are held only on Sundays until the end of March.

Participation in wrestling is not based on membership, it is an event where every camel driver can wrestle his

camel if a fee is paid. The universe of the study was tried to be created based on various wrestling calendars covering the period 2019-2020 (October-March) and 2020-2021 (October-March).

The cameleers to whom the survey was applied were selected based on their experience in wrestling. In the selection of camel owners for camel wrestling, which is a traditional cultural transfer, care was taken to include people with this knowledge, and data was obtained from camel owners who met the research criteria and whose verbal consent was obtained to participate in the research. Participation in the survey was limited due to reasons such as responding to the survey on a voluntary basis, wrestling being an activity that requires preliminary preparation, and time limitation. The number of camel drivers who participated in the survey was determined by simple random sampling method.

The questions that make up the survey consist of questions obtained by literature review and based on the questions of previous similar studies (Manav et al, 2019; Koç and Demir, 2020).

The survey form contains only questions suitable for descriptive statistics. No scale (Likert, etc.) was used, so only the answers to these questions are presented with descriptive statistics (numbers and percentages) in the findings section. In addition, second-hand sources were also used in the study.

Since the study is not an invasive intervention and is an oral study based solely on the voluntary participation of camel breeders, an ethics committee decision was not taken.

The analysis of the collected data was made in SPSS for Windows 22 program and the results obtained were presented in tables as averages, frequency distribution and percentages.

The practices carried out in Aydın, İzmir, Denizli, Muğla provinces and districts in the Aegean Region, where camel wrestling is widely practiced, were analyzed within the framework of "Ethics of Animal Use in Camel Wrestling", "Animal Protection Law" and "Regulation of the Camel Breeding Federation". In addition, the literature on similar practices in the world was also reviewed.

## Results

In 2012, the "Camel Culture and Camel Wrestling Federation (DEĞÜF)" was established in Turkey with the merger of eight camel associations. The regulation of the Federation was approved by the Aydın Governorship Provincial Animal Protection Board in 2015 and entered into force (Anonymous, 2015). The regulation of the Federation has been prepared by the 6th article of the Animal Protection Law No. 5199 and the decision of the Aydın Governorship Animal Protection Board, dated 05.06.2015 and numbered 2015/71. Article 6 of Law No. 5199 states that "Stricken animals cannot be used for commercial and show purposes or for riding and transportation in any

way". Article 1-(1) of the Federation Regulation states that the purpose is "to ensure the protection of camels and the organization of camel wrestling within the framework of this regulation" (Anonymous, 2004). Camel wrestling is organized on the basis of Article 11 of the Law on the Protection of Animals states that "Animals shall not be trained in a way that exceeds their natural capacity or strength, or by methods that cause injury, unnecessary suffering, or encouragement of bad habits. It is forbidden to make animals fight with another living animal. Folkloric, non-violent traditional shows may be organized with the approval of the Ministry and with the permission of the Provincial Animal Protection Boards." Section 3 of the Regulation provides detailed information on how the "Grouping, Classification and Scoring of Camels" will be carried out.

The camels to wrestle; in the competitions, the principle of equality was included in the wrestling by classifying them according to the measures (height and weight). With the decision of Aydın Governorship Provincial Animal Protection Board dated 27.09.2017 and numbered 32, it was decided that "all health and safety measures should be taken, the animals to be wrestled should be checked by a veterinarian, a veterinarian should be present during the event, the animals should be prevented from injury, violence and torment, and in such a case, the show should be stopped and protective measures should be taken to prevent the animals from suffering" in camel wrestling (Anonymous, 2017a).

#### *Approach to camel wrestling in terms of ethics and animal welfare*

Although care is taken in terms of ethics and animal welfare in camel wrestling, it is possible to mention both positive and negative examples. The following examples can be given for the positive ones:

The organizing committee makes sure that camels practicing the same games are paired with each other (Yılmaz and Mehmet, 2015). Camel wrestling has a duration. The final result is not expected in the wrestling. In a short time (1-2 minutes) the camels show their games and separate from each other (Ertürk and Gülşen, 2016). In order to prevent the camels from biting and injuring each other during the wrestling, the mouths of the camels are tied by the "mouth tie maker" and checked by the "mouth tie checker" before going to the field (Şanlı, 2019). When the referee recognizes the camel to be defeated, he blows his whistle and ends the wrestling. The aim here is not to give camels the opportunity to make each other run away, shout, destroy or give up. In this way, the defeated camels are prevented from getting cold/discouraged from wrestling and the camel is not hurt (Davulcu, 2016).

However, despite these positive examples, camels may develop "shoulder lameness" or fractures in their leg bones (femur, humerus or tarsal) due to long years of wrestling, pushing each other or falling on each other (Anonymous, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020, 2021,

2022). Slaughtering of camels that get old, run away from wrestling or get injured can be given as negative examples (Arslan, 1997, 1998; Çalışkan, 2009).

#### *Survey with camel owners*

A camel wrestling survey consisting of 11 questions was conducted with 35 camel breeders randomly selected during camel wrestling on different dates. The survey results were evaluated in terms of animal rights.

It was determined that the average experience of the breeders was  $11.86 \pm 1.11$  years and they were  $40.40 \pm 1.32$  years old on average (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Distribution of age and experience years of camel breeding

	Mean±SE	Min.-Max.
Breeding experience (years)	11.86±1.11	2-30
Breeder age (years)	40.40±1.32	27-57

It was found that the highest number of the camellers participating in the survey was from two geographical regions (İzmir/Selçuk and Muğla/Yatağan) with 6 people (17.1%) and the lowest number of participants was from Aydın/Bozdoğan and Nazilli regions [2 people (5.7%)] (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Geographical regions where the camel owners participated in the survey lived

City-District	Number	Percentage (%)
Aydın-Efeler	5	14.3
Aydın-İncirliova	3	8.6
Aydın-Bozdoğan	2	5.7
Aydın-Germencik	4	11.4
Aydın-Nazilli	2	5.7
Aydın-Söke	3	8.6
Denizli-Sarayköy	4	11.4
İzmir-Selçuk	6	17.1
Muğla-Yatağan	6	17.1
Total	35	100.0

To the question "What is your reason for participating in wrestling?", 11 people (31.4%) answered for entertainment purposes, 16 people (45.7%) because it is cultural heritage, and 8 people (22.9%) because it is a traditional activity (Table 3).

**Table 3.** The distribution of the answers given by the camel owners regarding the reasons for their participation in wrestling

	Frequency	Percent
Entertainment	11	31.4
Cultural Heritage	16	45.7
Traditional event	8	22.9
Total	35	100.0

To the question whether camel wrestling is a competition or not, 28 people (80%) answered yes, 4 people (11.4%) answered no and 3 people (8.6%) did not know (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Camel owners asked, “Is camel wrestling a competition?” Distribution of their answers to the question

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	28	80.0
No	4	11.4
I don't know	3	8.6
Total	35	100.0

To the question “Does a camel suffer?”, 26 people (74.3%) answered no, 6 people (7.1%) did not know and 3 people (8.6%) answered yes (Table 5).

**Table 5.** The answers given by the camel owners to the question “Does the camel suffer during camel wrestling?”

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	3	8.6
No	26	74.3
I don't know	6	17.1
Total	35	100.0

To the question “Is there betting in camel wrestling?” 34 people (97.1%) answered no and 1 person (2.9%) answered yes (Table 6).

**Table 6.** The answers given by the camel owners to the question “Is it possible to bet on camel wrestling?”

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	34	97.1
I don't know	1	2.9
Total	35	100.0

It was seen that 24 people (68.6%) answered yes, 7 people (20%) answered no and 4 people (11.4%) did not know the answer to the question “Is equal pairing (according to size and strength) done in camel wrestling?” (Table 7).

**Table 7.** “Is there equal matching (according to size and strength) in camel wrestling?” distribution of answers given by the camel owners to the question

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	24	68.6
No	7	20.0
I don't know	4	11.4
Total	35	100.0

To the question “Are camels tortured in transfer-transport in camel wrestling?”, 23 people (65.7%) answered no, 7 people (20%) sometimes and 5 people (14.3%) answered yes (Table 8).

**Table 8.** The question asked to the participants “Are camels tortured in transfer-transport in camel wrestling?” distribution of their answers to the question

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	5	14.3
No	23	65.7
Sometimes	7	20.0
Total	35	100.0

To the question “Are animal rights taken into consideration?” 26 people (74.3%) answered yes and 9 people (25.7%) did not know (Table 9).

**Table 9.** The answers given by the camel owners to the question “Is Animal Rights taken into consideration in camel wrestling?”

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	26	74.3
I don't know	9	25.7
Total	35	100.0

To the question whether camel wrestling is carried out in accordance with the rules of the Federation, 23 people (65.7%) answered yes, 10 people (28.6%) did not know and 2 people (5.7%) answered no (Table 10).

**Table 10.** The answers given by the camel owners to the question “the question of whether camel wrestling is done according to the rules of the Camel Wrestling Federation”

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	23	65.7
No	2	5.7
I don't know	10	28.6
Total	35	100.0

Finally, 33 people (94.3%) answered “yes” and 2 people (5.7%) answered “don't know” to the question “should camel wrestling be under the control of the state?” (Table 11).

**Table 11.** The answers given by the camel owners to the question “Should camel wrestling be done under the control of the state?”

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	33	94.3
I don't know	2	5.7
Total	35	100.0

#### *The Status of Camel Wrestling within the Scope of Legislation in Türkiye*

The effort to systematize man's view of animals has a long history (Savaş et al., 2009). Starting in the twentieth century in the West, mankind has directed its endeavours to establish the human-animal relationship within



a philosophical system first, and then to the aim of creating a moral and legal basis (Benton, 1996).

In Türkiye, non-governmental organizations such as the “Animal Rights Federation” carry out both legal and social studies on animal rights. The “Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry” also regulates regulations and laws on animal welfare. The “Animal Protection Law”, which is in force today, provides inspection and sanctioning services in all matters related to animals, under the leadership of this ministry. However, although the legal bases for all animal wrestling-festivals are drawn within the framework of the “Animal Protection Law”, there is no special legislation on the use of animals in sports, entertainment and cultural activities.

Article 10 of the Law (Anonymus, 2004) states that “An animal cannot be used for filming, performances, advertisements and similar works in such a way that causes pain, suffering or harm.”. Article 11 of the same law states “It is forbidden to make animals fight with another living animal. Traditional non-violent demonstrations for folkloric purposes may be organized with the approval of the Ministry and by obtaining permission from the provincial animal protection committees”. With both articles, an arrangement has been made to include camel wrestling. In Article 29/1th of the Implementing Regulation of the Animal Protection Law includes provisions on the protection of animals in general terms, such as the obligation that “animals to be used in shows, especially for commercial purposes, must have their health checks carried out and the vaccination programme must be recorded on the health card”.

### *Comparison of camel wrestling in Türkiye with examples in the World*

Camel wrestling is widely practiced in Türkiye as well as in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the Middle East.

Although there are examples to the contrary in Türkiye (Figure 1), mostly camels are wrestled by wearing havut and having their mouths tied (Yılmaz and Mehmet, 2015). Whereas, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, camels are wrestled without wearing a havut and without their mouths being tied (Najafizada, 2013).

Although there are contrary examples (Figure 2) in the transport of camels to wrestling areas in Türkiye (Anonymous, 2017b), it is seen that animal welfare rule are tried to be followed. In addition, animal welfare are carried out with permission and “Animal Transport Passports” and controlled by law enforcement officers (Anonymous, 2022).

### **Discussion**

Today, camel wrestling in Türkiye is based on 2 regulations. The first one is the traditional organisation rules. The other is the Law No. 5199 on the Protection of Animals and the regulation on “Camel Culture and Camel Wrestling Federations”, which was regulated according to this law and entered into force in 2014.

Türkiye has no special legislation regarding all animal species used in festivals, shows, and wrestling. However, Animal Protection Law No. 5199 was enacted in 2004, and the Implementation Regulation of this Law contains



Figure 1. The mouths of the camels are kept closed during wrestling





Figure 2. A bad example of camel transport

general provisions regarding the protection of animals. In this law it is stated that the fighting of animals by humans is prohibited, but folkloric-traditional non-violent shows will be allowed, and it was observed that this article was complied with.

The fact that 26 people (74.3%) answered “no” to the question “Do camels suffer when wrestling?” (Table 5) asked in the survey conducted with camel breeders can be considered as an approach in compliance with the relevant provision of the law (Table 5).

Although regarding the idea that animals do not suffer

in camel wrestling was concluded in the research, according to Yiğit et al., (2012) it is also must be accepted that; “the judgement that creating an entertainment situation forcibly making animals fight with each other that do not fight with each other except for hierarchical position and mating reasons (especially bullfighting) is not appropriate in terms of animal use ethics and animal protection legislation”.

In animal husbandry, transport is an important factor that affects the welfare and health of the animal and causes stress (Giovagnoli et al., 2002).



Figure 3. Transport of camels for wrestling

The question “Are camels tortured during transfer/transport for camel wrestling?” was asked in the questionnaire and it was found that 23 people (65.7%) answered “no” and 5 people (14.3%) answered “yes” (Table 8) and animal welfare rules were complied with (Figure 3).

However, it has also been observed that laws and regulations are inadequate in implementing animal welfare standards in all areas related to camel wrestling.

In Spain, a survey study was conducted with 2522 people in 2016 with a similar perspective based on bullfights. It was concluded that the majority of those who participated in this survey did not like bullfights and the majority of them did not participate or watch such events, and also received significant criticism from various segments of the society with the rise of the animal rights movement. In the same study, when asked whether bullfighting was seen as “culture, art and identity”, the proportion of respondents who agreed that bullfighting should be protected as a Spanish cultural heritage was balanced (40% vs. 38%). 22 per cent of the respondents were indifferent (not interested in the issue) (Gustavo et al., 2017).

The respondents to the question of “reason for participating in camel wrestling” stated that 11 people (31.4%) participated for entertainment purposes, 16 people (45.7%) for cultural heritage purposes, and 8 people (22.9%) because it was a traditional event. With the common result of both studies (40-47.7%), it can be said that both bullfighting and camel wrestling events are seen as a cultural heritage and they are similar in this aspect.

The answer “no” given by 34 people (97.1%) to the question “Is betting played in camel wrestling?” in the questionnaire can be concluded that camel wrestling in Turkey is not carried out for betting-money gain (Table 6) and is in compliance with the “Animal Protection Law”. However, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, camels are fight for three hours and many betting games are played (Najafizada, 2013). In the researches, there was no evidence that bets were placed in Turkey (Najafizada, 2013).

Based on these reasons, according to survey data, it has been seen that camel wrestling in Turkey is not called “fight” but named it “wrestling” or “competition” (28 of 35 people said yes at the rate of 80%).

In the study, it was observed that 68.6% answered yes to the question “Are equal matches made in camel wrestling?” (Table 7).

The Camel Wrestling Federation Regulation stated that the camels wrestle were classified according to the measures (such as height and weight) in the competitions and that the wrestling should be done according to the principle of equality. Based on the statute and the survey results, it can be concluded that the principle of equality is based on the wrestling and that the camels compete with equal powers during wrestling, so that the stronger camels do not harm the weak ones.

In the survey “Are animal rights considered in camel

wrestling?” It was observed that 74.3% of the respondents answered “yes” to the question.

When all the articles of the Animal Protection Law are examined, it is understood that it is mainly related to breeding domestic and ornamental animals. However, it also covers all animals (including wild animals) from the relevant law article. However, in Turkey, there is no specific section on animal rights in the “Law on the Protection of Animals” or similar laws that covers “animal wrestling” or “animal races” in the context of “camel wrestling”.

Again Williams (2015) emphasized that camel wrestling pits supporters of camel wrestling against animal rights defenders who argue that camel wrestling is technically illegal according to animal rights laws in Turkey.

Regarding camel wrestling, which has brought many controversies in the world, Mosko et al. (2020) stated that animal rights activists see it as a purely commercial issue and a fighting activity and that the animal protection law in force in Turkey should limit camel wrestling and prevent death and serious injuries.

In the study, 65.7% of the participants answered “yes” and 28.6% answered “don’t know” to the question “Are camel wrestling held according to the rules of the federation?”, which seems to be qualitatively positive, but does not cover the whole event (Table 10).

It is undoubtedly important that animal competitions are organized according to the rules and on a legal basis. However, camel wrestling should be carried out in a more effective legal structure, and animal welfare should be taken as a basis. It was determined that 94.3% of the respondents answered “yes” and 5.7% answered “don’t know” to the question “Should camel wrestling be organized under state control?” (Table 11). Since camel wrestling is held in front of a busy audience and a large area, it will create difficulties in maintaining control; leaving all control and authority to the federation organizing committee will cause deficiencies for animal rights and public health. Therefore, state control should be more radical in these wrestlings. The decision of the state to make it mandatory to have a veterinarian in camel wrestling in 2017 is the most essential step in this field.

It reveals that various societies use animals in shows, entertainment, and festivals in line with their traditions, culture, and belief systems. Watching animals for entertainment is not a new activity, and it is known that the Romans also enjoyed the animal struggle and death show in the arena. These practices, which create comprehensive discussion platforms within their value systems, also bring animal ethics and welfare to the agenda (Kalof, 2007).

It is recognized by FAO (2006) that the treatment of animals differs between cultures. As the reason for this difference, it clarifies the value status of animals in different cultures in the world with his statement that “It is reflected in behavior according to different belief, value

and tradition systems and generally different animal species or the importance of animals in use”.

## Conclusion

As a result it can be said that; it can be concluded that in animal races or wrestling, which are accepted as traditional and cultural heritage in the world and in Türkiye, the “principle of usefulness”, which is one of the ethical principles, is operated unilaterally with a human-centered approach.

In addition, animal wrestling is legally inadequate, and more special regulations are needed for animals in this regard. On the other hand, in addition to the “ Law on the Protection of Animals” of the state, also the “Regulation of Camel Breeding Culture and Camel Wrestling Federation” provides a “humane attitude” and “contribution to their legal status” regarding the use of camels in camel wrestling.

When the research is taken in hand with all its aspects, it makes important contributions to the literature as no other study that carries the subject headings together has been found.

It is thought that the study will contribute to the deficiency in this area.

## Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in this study.

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