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The Work-Life Balance of Public Sector Employees in Poland in the Context of Available Legal Regulations

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this article is to present changes in the legal system in Poland regarding work-life balance and to confront them with the expectations of public sector employees in this area.

Research Design & Methods: The study is based on the analysis of literature, normative acts, and the results of nationwide surveys conducted in 2021 in Poland based on sample of 3,114 public sector employees.

Findings: Research shows that remote work, the ability to choose working hours, and informal working time arrangements are solutions that would significantly help public sector employees reconcile work and private life.

Implications/Recommendations: The analysis of legal acts shows changes in the approach to the WLB concept over the last decade in Poland and the development of solutions facilitating the reconciliation of professional and personal life. These changes are expected by employees. Difficulties related to the implementation of WLB tools in public organisations are identified resulting from their specific structure, procedures, and budget constraints.

Contribution/Value Added: The article is a source of knowledge for theoreticians, practitioners, employers, and public authorities. The presented results can be used when making decisions aimed at optimising the working conditions of public sector employees and adapting them to changing social needs and legal requirements.

Article classification: research article

Keywords: work–life balance, public sector, public authorities, legal regulations

JEL classification: I 38, J 80, J18, J24, K31, K36

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Introduction

In response to the changing needs of society and employees, the deepening demographic crisis, as well as due to the accelerated pace of life and technological progress – which both facilitates and complicates balancing personal and professional life – a dynamic development of the Work-Life Balance (WLB) concept has been observed in recent years. The development of legal regulations related to it can also be seen. Public authorities, operating both at national and international levels, are trying to cope with emerging new problems and challenges by implementing new legal acts and changing the catalogue of WLB instruments.

The aim of the article is to present the changes that have occurred in the legal system in Poland in recent years in the area of WLB in comparison to the expectations of public sector employees. The implementation of WLB instruments is particularly difficult and specific in public organisations, limited by rigid organisational structures, procedures, and budgets, and at the same time burdened with general social pressure to maintain the continuity of public service provision at the highest level.

The conclusions from the article will be drawn based on the analysis of the literature on the subject, normative acts, and the results of nationwide surveys conducted on a group of 3,114 employees employed in the public sector in 2021. The presented research results can be a source of knowledge for theoreticians, practitioners, employers, and public authorities, serving as material when making decisions regarding the optimisation of the working conditions of public sector employees.

Theory development

The evolution of the Work-Life Balance concept

The concept of WLB, which involves reconciling professional and private life, has its roots in the changing socioeconomic context and transformations in the employment structure, which began to develop with the advancing industrialisation already in the 19th century. Before the emergence of industry, much of the production was carried out by families, mainly for subsistence (Clark, 2000, pp. 747–770). However, as the market economy became more industrialised, employment under so-called „foreign employers,” or those outside family circles, became increasingly common. These dependencies necessitated changes to the social security and insurance systems in many countries around the world. High involvement in work in industry and growing criticism of working conditions resulted in the negative consequences of excessive professional involvement being noticed (Bailyn, 1993). More and more attention has been paid to work-life balance. A breakthrough period for the development of the WLB concept was the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, the growing number of women entering the labour market and changing social roles further strengthened the interest in work-life balance. During that period, scientific research began to be conducted on the impact of work on private life and on employees’ expectations in this area (Bond et al., 1997). It should be emphasised here that the results of the research conducted at that time were diverse. Some of them confirmed that women experience more conflicts between work and private life than men do (Frone et al., 1992; Hammer et al., 1997), often showing a similar level of satisfaction with work and family life. Other analyses showed no differences in the psychological involvement of women and men in work, pointing to, among others, instrumentality and interpersonal sensitivity as

the main factors influencing the conflict between roles (Blanchard-Fields et al., 1997). Women's entry into the workforce has led to the development of corporate policies to support employees in achieving this balance. The largest companies began to modify their internal regulations and procedures, paying more and more attention to the values and needs of, above all, their employees. The changes included, among others, flexible working time, work from home, and the possibility of childcare, as well as other benefits. In the 1980s, men also began to express their concerns about the harmonisation of professional life and private life. At the end of this decade, work-life balance was perceived not only as a problem of women, but also of men, entire families, organisations, and national cultures (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). The 1990s established the recognition of work-life balance as a key issue for all women, men, parents, non-parents, single people, and couples (Bird, 2006, pp. 21–30). With technological progress and the globalisation of the economy, the boundaries between work and personal life have begun to blur, prompting the development of new time and energy management strategies in both areas. The pressure on employees increased and, therefore, so did the importance of work-life balance (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In the 1990s, the first concepts and theoretical models appeared aimed at understanding the relationship between work and private life (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002). Various solutions to problems related to the conflict between professional and family roles have also been proposed (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998, pp. 139–149). Changing social trends and expectations, enormous modifications in family models – and, consequently, in the nature of social roles performed – to which the entry of women into the labour market and the increase in their education contributed significantly, have led to a significant development of research in the area of Work-Life Balance (Powell et al., 2019, pp. 54–71). The WLB concept has evolved over several decades, from the initial assumptions about the separation of work and life to a more complex approach that takes into account the integration of these areas. Currently, we strive for compliance and harmony between both spheres of life.

The definition of WLB

The concept of Work-Life Balance, in the most general sense, refers to a harmonious balance between work and private life, which includes appropriate distribution of time and attention to work, family, social relationships, rest, and personal development. It is the pursuit of a satisfying life both in the professional life and in the private sphere while minimising conflicts and stress resulting from their imbalance. Researchers in the literature present different approaches to the definition of the Work-Life Balance concept, which is also influenced by the time in which they conducted their analyses. Some suggest that WLB is the ability to achieve goals in both professional and personal life while feeling satisfied in both areas. According to others, the term 'balance' means equal commitment and satisfaction with professional and life roles (Bulger, 2014, pp. 7231–7232). H. J. Greenhaus, M. K. Collins, and D. J. Shaw, narrowing the scope of the subject, define work-family balance as "the degree to which a person is equally committed to and satisfied with his or her professional and family roles" (Greenhaus et al., 2003, pp. 510–531). Imbalance or interference between professional and private roles may cause conflict, resulting in various consequences, which are widely discussed in the literature on the subject (Bulger, 2014, pp. 7231–7232).

It should be emphasised that in most of the earlier studies from the 1970s and 1980s, when writing about private life, the authors usually had family roles in mind, primarily the role of the mother. Nowadays, however, due to changing social and cultural conditions, the perspective

is broadening, and researchers emphasise that when examining WLB, other private roles, not only family ones, should also be taken into account.

Due to the lack of a universal definition of Work-Life Balance, but also the lack of a common point for everyone at which it could be said that the balance has been exceeded, it is necessary to define this term individually in each study or analysis. This article assumes that work-life balance is a key element of human resources management in modern organisations operating in various economic sectors. Initiatives related to WLB require commitment to understanding the needs of employees and employers and adapting the organisation's activities depending on changes in the environment. Public authorities play a special role in this constantly evolving process, creating a legal framework and implementing specific instruments and solutions designed to support the development of the WLB concept (Szczudlińska-Kanoś & Marzec, 2022).

The modern approach to Work-Life Balance emphasises the integration of work and personal life, encouraging the search for harmony through flexible solutions such as remote work, flexible working hours, and family support programmes. The idea has become an important part of the political discourse at various government and organisational levels, primarily related to human resources management and employee well-being (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011, pp. 165–183), regardless of the economic sector in which the organisations function. Moreover, this idea is of interest to researchers from other disciplines, including psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and lawyers (see: Thilagavathy & Geetha, 2023, pp. 258–276). Contemporary research on WLB often focuses on identifying factors influencing work-life balance and developing practical strategies supporting the harmonious combination of both spheres of life (Kossek & Lautsch, 2017). The concept is also important for practitioners – especially public authorities that shape the legal system and implement tools enabling the implementation of the WLB idea – as well as for employers who in their everyday activities, using specific legal, economic, and technological instruments, try to take care of harmony between the professional and private spheres of their employees. Employers and public sector employees are in a particularly difficult situation, primarily due to numerous organisational, financial, and legal restrictions.

Difficulties in implementing the Work-Life Balance concept in the public sector

Implementing the Work-Life Balance concept in public organisations is a complex process accompanied by many challenges and difficulties. Research conducted in this area indicates a number of factors that may influence the achievement of work-life balance by public sector employees (among others: Oktosatiro & Liu, 2019; Afifah & Satrya, 2022; Dulk & Groeneveld, 2013). Firstly, public organisations are institutions acting for the benefit of society, and their main task is to provide public services and maintain constant access to them. These obligations result in more restrictive solutions regarding schedules and determining the working hours of employees. Limited opportunities to perform remote or hybrid work or implement flexible working time have a huge impact on achieving harmony in the private and professional lives of employees. At this point, it is also necessary to mention the specificity of the work of uniformed services (Sandhya, 2024; Oskarsson et al., 2020) as well as health care workers (Putri, 2023).

Another factor hindering the implementation of WLB in the public sector is financial resources. Public organisations operating on the basis of public finance regulations have limited possibilities of managing financial resources. They must, therefore, operate within strictly defined budgets, which limits flexibility in making decisions and conceiving solutions enabling the implementation

of WLB. Rigid budgets also often mean the inability to invest in modern technologies and technical infrastructure necessary to implement solutions that contribute to strengthening the harmony between employees' private and professional lives, including work outside the organisation's headquarters.

Inadequately educated staff, especially management, as well as the lack of understanding of the problems related to excessive workload and lack of work-life balance may also lead to ignoring the needs of employees in this area, which will impact the results of their work. An appropriate management style, which is adapted to the organisation and employees, the type of leadership, and the personnel policy properly conducted by the management staff are the basic organisational elements that can affect the level of balance between employees' professional and private lives.

The specific, often hierarchical organisational structure of the public sector as well as the excess of procedures and formalities make it much difficult for both management staff and lower-level employees to flexibly manage their time and private life. Decisions about work and leave schedules are often made higher up the hierarchy, limiting employees' ability to align their personal lives with work demands.

Finally, frequent political changes, which often imply the replacement of staff in top positions in public organisations, as well as numerous modifications in legal regulations may lead to a lack of stability in the organisation, which may make it difficult to implement long-term strategies related to the improvement of working conditions and work-life balance of employees.

The above presents only selected factors that may hinder the effective implementation of the Work-Life Balance concept in public organisations. The limited possibilities of taking care of the WLB of employees in individual organisations operating in the public sector make the role of the state and public authorities in this area extremely important. Research results show that institutional pressure is the most important factor motivating public sector organisations to offer WLB support to their employees. State support in a given country has a positive relationship with the development of WLB in public organisations, in particular in public administration organisations (Dulk & Groeneveld, 2013). International research also shows a statistically-significant positive relationship between work-life balance and work engagement in many different European welfare states, after controlling for factors at the individual level (Björk-Fant et al., 2023), confirming that the actions of states, in particular the social policy model they adopt and legal regulations that facilitate, among others, care for children or the elderly, have a key impact on the development of WLB in organisations. Therefore, any modifications that strengthen WLB instruments are purposeful and desirable. The changes that have occurred in the legal system in Poland in this area in recent years are only briefly presented below. They were also referred to the results of surveys in which the respondents – public sector employees – indicated what expectations they had from their employers in the area of WLB.

Legal regulations in the area of Work-life Balance in Poland

For over a dozen years, many countries have witnessed the development of legal solutions designed to support employees in achieving work-life balance. Public authorities not only try to meet the new expectations of employees, but, above all, by promoting equal opportunities for women and men, promoting the inclusion of women in the labour market, and combating gender discrimination, they try to prevent the demographic crisis and its unfavourable consequences. According to research conducted by the Randstad employment agency on a sample of over

27,000 employees aged 18–67 in 34 countries around the world, employees prioritise work-life balance. WLB is the most important factor influencing workplace satisfaction – this is the opinion of as many as 94% of respondents from Poland and 1% fewer respondents worldwide. In these analyses, remuneration came second – 92% and 93% of responses, respectively, and third – the sense of employment stability (89% each) (Randstad, 2024).

In Poland, modifications to legal acts and the development of WLB tools have been recorded for over a decade. It should be mentioned here that maternity leave was extended several times, additional maternity leave was introduced (2010–2013), as well as parental leave and paternity leave were introduced (in 2016 and 2010, respectively) (Act, 1999). Moreover, there are changes in social benefits that expand both their objective and subjective scope. In addition to family benefits and supplements to family benefits, regulated by the Act on Social Assistance of 12th March, 2004 (Act, 2004), other benefits were introduced, such as the 500+ Programme and then the 800+ Programme, to help raise children (Act, 2016), or ‘Good Start’ – 300 PLN for a school kit once a year (Resolution, 2018). In 2011, the regulations regarding institutional care for children were also significantly modified (Act, 2011). All these changes were addressed to parents raising children and were intended to make it easier for them to reconcile work and family life.

An important moment for the development of WLB in Poland was the implementation of the Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20th June, 2019, on work-life balance for parents and carers, and repealing the Council Directive 2010/18/EU (Directive (EU) 2019/1158). The directive introduced several significant changes to the Polish Labour Code, aimed at improving the working and living conditions of employees. New regulations governing remote work entered into force on 7th April, 2023. Firstly, the number of weeks of parental leave was increased. After the changes come into force, parents are entitled to 41 weeks or 43 weeks (in the case of multiple births) of such leave. Importantly, nine weeks of parental leave cannot be transferred to the other parent and are lost if not taken. For the entire period of parental leave, the parent using it receives a maternity benefit equivalent to 70% of the salary. When taking maternity and parental leave, a parent receives on average 81.5% remuneration. Moreover, in 2023, the two-week paternity leave was maintained, but the time until which it can be used was shortened – until the child is 12 months old. The directive also introduced facilities for employees who have relatives under their care. Footnotes have been implemented that allow for leave from work due to *force majeure* in the event of urgent family matters caused by an illness or an accident. Such leave for a full-time employee may amount to a maximum of 2 days or 16 hours in a calendar year. For this time off, the employee will receive half of the remuneration, calculated as an equivalent for vacation time. An unpaid 5-day carer’s leave has also been introduced, which is granted to provide personal care or support for serious medical reasons to a person living in the same household, as well as to the father, mother, children, and spouse. Moreover, the amendment to the Labour Code made it possible for an employee raising a child up to the age of 8 to apply for flexible work organisation. Additionally, an obligation was introduced to obtain from an employee who is raising a child until the child is 8 years old (and not 4 years old as before) consent to employment overtime, at night, in the intermittent working time system and to delegation outside the permanent place of work. According to the directive, one of the flexible solutions that employees-caregivers should have at their disposal should also be the possibility of remote work (Labour Code, 1974).

Remote work is extremely important not only for employees with small children. The latest research shows that for nearly 40% of people, remote work is extremely important and is not subject to discussion during conversations with the employer. This trend is even more visible in Poland, where 43% of employees consider remote work to be crucial. It is also interesting that 22% of employees in Poland, and 37% globally, are considering changing their place of residence due to remote work. This data suggests that remote work is becoming a lasting trend, not a passing fad (Randstad, 2024).

The development of remote work has somehow forced public authorities to regulate it legally. In Poland, the Act of 1st December, 2022, amending the Labour Code and certain other acts (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 240), introduced remote work to the Labour Code while repealing the provisions on telework. New regulations governing online work entered into force on 7th April, 2023. In the light of Article 67, „work may be performed entirely or partially in a place indicated by the employee and each time agreed with the employer, including the employee’s home address, in particular using means of direct distance communication (remote work)” (Labour Code, 1974). The Labour Code provides for both full remote work and hybrid work. The legislator also provided for the possibility of performing the so-called occasional remote work, which is granted at the employee’s request and is non-binding, and the employer may refuse to take it into account. Occasional remote work may be carried out for 24 days in the calendar year, and due to its special nature, specific provisions regarding, for example, the obligation to provide materials and work tools are not applied (MRPIPS, 2024).

Changes regarding remote work in the public sector are also planned in the near future. The modifications are aimed at introducing more flexible working hours and forms of organisation in offices. According to the new regulations, office managers will be obliged to establish a fixed work schedule from Monday to Friday, ensuring full 8 hours a day. Work will start at the earliest at 7:00 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m., or will begin at the latest at 10:00 a.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. If the office serves the public, it must be open on at least one day of the week from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Additionally, it is possible to introduce shift work and flexibility in working days, taking into account the individual needs of employees. The new regulations also aim to standardise the rules for all employees in the office, including members of the civil service. Office managers will be able to designate days off taking into account the working time and needs of employees. These changes are intended to improve the attractiveness of work in the public sector and adapt it to the contemporary expectations of employees (Draft regulation of the Prime Minister, 2024). The changes proposed in the public sector are an important signal and give hope for the possibility of adapting working time and methods of operation in offices and other public organisations. In the face of changing conditions on the labour market, the public sector must adapt to employee expectations in order to attract and retain the best specialists, despite limited financial resources. Flexible forms of work can be an attractive tool in drawing and retaining engaged and efficient employees. Below are the results of a nationwide survey conducted among employees in the public sector, which aim to show what expectations they have in the context of balancing professional life and private life.

Research methodology

The presented research results are part of nationwide research that was conducted among 10,331 respondents, including 7,800 professionally-active parents with children in the period from

16th March to 2nd April, 2021¹, and was preceded by a pilot study. For the purposes of this article, only the group of public sector employees with children to raise was analysed – 3,114 employees. The analysed group included 2,930 (94.09%) women and 184 (5.91%) men. The respondents were most often aged 41–50 years – 52.34%; 31–40 years old – 42.49%; and 21–30 years old – 1.7%. The respondents lived in towns of various sizes. The largest cities, with over 500,000 inhabitants, inhabited 29.13% of the respondents; villages – 26.36%; cities with up to 50,000 inhabitants – 20.91%. The respondents usually had higher education Master’s degrees – 78.61%; Bachelor’s degrees – 8.8 percent; or secondary education – 10.15%. 59.67% of the respondents had 11–20 years of work experience; 26.53% – 21–30 years of work experience; 11.21% – less than 10 years of work experience; and 2.6% – over 30 years of work experience. The respondents most often had two children to raise (54.46%), then one child (29.06%), and three children (13.33%).

The study used the diagnostic survey method, and the technique was the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) online survey. The questionnaire consisted of 37 questions (mostly closed using a Likert scale, nominal scales, and 2 open questions) and was available on the website of the national electronic daily Librus² and sent via the portal directly to user accounts. The results were prepared using the „Statistica 13” programme. The main aim of the research was to comprehensively assess the situation of working parents, and in particular to diagnose how employees combine their professional duties with child care. One of the specific objectives was to check whether the changes introduced in the Polish legal system in the area of WLB meet the expectations of public sector employees. In order to achieve the detailed objective presented above, several research questions were asked: Do public institutions make it easier for employees to combine work with childcare? What do public institutions offer their employees in the area of WLB? What solutions do working parents expect that would make it easier to care for children?

Discussion of the results

The research shows that 57.55% of public sector employees are able to separate their professional and personal lives (definitely yes – 17.15%, rather yes – 40.40%). Interestingly, 6% fewer private sector employees responded in the same way – 51.15% (definitely yes – 14.45, rather yes – 36.7%) (n=3316). Analyses have shown that when choosing a workplace, the ability to reconcile work and private life is the dominant factor for 29.45% of the respondents working in the public sector, and for 32.95%, this is a very important but not decisive factor. 29.13% of the respondents considered this an important factor. For comparison, for 37.06% employees of private companies, it was the decisive factor.

In the public sector, almost 43.06% of employers make it easier for employees to perform professional and personal duties, in particular child care, and in business as many as 59.62%. There is also a definite difference in the answer – it definitely does not make it easier.

Almost half of public sector employers offer remote work to their employees, but almost the same percentage do not offer flexible working time. In over 60%, organisations do not have flexible scope of responsibilities.

¹ Research conducted together with Dr Małgorzata Marzec from the Institute of Public Affairs, Faculty of Management and Social Communication, Jagiellonian University.

² Librus is a supplier of unique systems that support thousands of Polish schools and local government units in their daily work. The Librus company has been operating on the Polish market for over 20 years. Librus systems are used by over 12,000 schools in 1,700 local government units.

Table 1. Reconciling professional and private life as a factor influencing the choice of workplace

Labor sector	Decisive/ dominant	Very important, but not decisive	Important	It's hard to judge	I do not care about this	Not very important	Irrelevant	Together
Sector public	917 29.45%	1026 32.95%	907 29.13%	139 4.46%	37 1.19%	63 2.02%	25 0.80%	3114
Private sector	1229 37.06%	1126 33.96%	736 22.20%	84 2.53%	42 1.27%	67 2.02%	32 0.97%	3316

Source: Own work.

Table 2. The employer's facilitation of combining work with childcare

Labor sector	Definitely yes	I guess so	I don't think so	Definitely not	Hard to say	Not applicable	Together
Public sector	436 14.00%	905 29.06%	767 24.63%	538 17.28%	252 8.09%	216 6.94%	3114
Private sector	867 26.15%	1110 33.47%	570 17.19%	277 8.35%	232 7.00%	260 7.84%	3316

Source: Own work.

Table 3. Solutions of public sector employers that help achieve harmony between professional and private life

Solutions	Offers	Does not offer	Hard to say	Not applicable	Together
Flexible working time	754 24.21%	1519 48.78%	341 10.95%	500 16.06%	3114
Flexible scope of duties	297 9.54%	1919 61.62%	294 9.44%	604 19.40%	3114
Remote work	1474 47.33%	1014 32.56%	249 8.00%	377 12.11%	3114
The organisation of child care	44 1.41%	2428 77.97%	68 2.18%	574 18.43%	3114

Source: Own work.

Table 4. Solutions that would significantly help public sector employees in reconciling work and private life depending on the employment sector

Solutions	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
The possibility to choose working hours	1704	54.72%
Working in a remote system	1677	53.85%
Informal working time arrangements	1454	46.69%
Employment flexibility/division of responsibilities included in the regulations	1293	41.52%
A gradual process of adaptation after a long break, e.g. maternity leave	883	28.36%
The organisation of child care	1190	38.21%
Surcharges for nursery and kindergarten	961	30.86%

The numbers do not add up. The question allowed for multiple answers.

Source: Own work.

Public sector employees assessed that the ability to choose working hours, remote work, and informal agreements on working hours are the most expected solutions that would help them achieve a balance between professional and private life.

Conclusions

In times of changing socioeconomic problems, the demographic crisis, as well as diverse and different expectations of employees, public authorities and organisations operating in all sectors of the economy face a number of challenges, and one of them is making it easier for employees to combine work and personal life. Harmony between these two spheres is extremely important, because it allows one to maintain a healthy mental and physical balance, which translates into the overall quality of life. Providing time for family or developing individual interests promotes greater professional and personal satisfaction, which, in turn, has a positive impact on work efficiency and the general well-being of both individual organisational units and entire societies.

The development of the WLB concept requires the implementation of various solutions and legal provisions that respond to the needs and changes. In recent years, numerous normative acts have been implemented in Poland, including those resulting from EU regulations, which have had a positive impact on the possibility of reconciling professional life with private life. In particular, leaves for the birth of a child were extended, additional days off to care for loved ones were introduced, and regulations regarding remote work were introduced. It should be mentioned that these solutions, especially the last one, depending on individual situations, may be either an opportunity for the development of WLB or a threat. However, these considerations are not the subject of this study. Regardless of the above, the practical implementation of WLB instruments is a huge financial and organisational challenge both for the state and for individual institutions. Public organisations are in a particularly difficult situation. Due to the specific requirements and constraints related to the functioning of the public sector – especially limited financial and human resources, rigid budgets, and the need to ensure the continuity of public services – these organisations struggle with challenges when implementing the work-life balance concept. In connection with the above, work on regulations that will allow public sector employers greater freedom when making decisions regarding working hours or online work outside the office should also be positively assessed. It should be emphasised that the changes taking place in the Polish legal system are consistent with employees' expectations. The research clearly shows that remote work, the ability to choose working hours, and informal working time arrangements are the most important elements in achieving work-life balance for public sector employees. Further modifications and adaptations of regulations to technological changes and the challenges associated with them are necessary, which is obviously required from the point of view of increasing public sector financing.

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Research Ethics Committee

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

All data will be available and shared upon request.
