



Finding true north in ethical practices in information service provision in academic libraries in Uganda

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Abstract

Ethical practices in information service provision have become integral for librarians and information professionals in the ever-evolving landscape of information dissemination and access. These practices encompass an array of principles governing professional behaviours, ensuring moral conduct, and preventing potential misconduct. This paper explores the ethical practices and information services in the Makerere University Business School (MUBS) library.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, with semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis as the data collection methods. The findings illuminated a comprehensive array of services available within the MUBS library context, including textbooks and eBooks short-term loans; reference books and e-reference books; internet and WIFI; current awareness; interlibrary loan; journals and e-journals access to patrons; MUBS librarians' dedication to principles such as equitable access, privacy protection, and intellectual property rights. Ethical dilemmas arising from balancing intellectual freedom and responsible information provision are also unveiled. These findings resonate with global ethical considerations in librarianship, reflecting libraries' evolving roles in the digital age. The study's insights will inform MUBS library operations and contribute to the scholarly discourse on ethical library practices. The research implies that librarians' ethical decisions impact service quality and user experiences.

Keywords: Academic libraries; Ethical principles; Information services; librarian

Background

Ethical practices in information service provision have become integral for librarians and information professionals in the ever-evolving landscape of information dissemination and access. These practices encompass an array of principles governing professional behaviours, ensuring moral conduct, and preventing potential misconduct (IFLA, 2021). Ethical practice within information service provision covers diverse perspectives, including material selection, access, intellectual freedom, copyright, confidentiality, and safeguarding user rights (Johnson, 2014; Ssekitto, 2018). In contrast, unethical practices may involve

withholding information, misleading clients, or revealing private data, underscoring the vital role of upholding ethical standards in libraries (Rubin, 2021).

The cruciality of finding True North in ethical practices in information services in academic libraries cannot be overstated. In a metaphorical sense, "True North" refers to a clear and unwavering ethical direction or moral compass that guides individuals or organisations in making ethical decisions and conducting themselves with integrity (George et al., 2010, p. 24). It implies the pursuit of ethical excellence and an unwavering commitment to ethical values and standards in the provision of information

services. Finding True North in ethical practices is crucial because it serves as a moral compass, guiding individuals and society in making principled decisions and actions (Adams et al., 2001; George et al., 2010). Several authors have highlighted the significance of finding True North in ethical practices in individuals and services provision.

True North in ethical practices is akin to establishing a moral compass to ensure individuals maintain consistent ethical principles in their decision-making and actions (Adams et al., 2001; Ferrell & Fraedrich, 2021). Furthermore, it is foundational for assessing various options and behaviours against a universal moral (Ferrell & Fraedrich, 2021; George et al., 2010) and serves as a reference point for accountability, compelling individuals and organizations to uphold ethical standards and be answerable for their actions (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001; Crane et al., 2019). Beyond individual implications, this ethical orientation fosters social cohesion, offering a shared ethical foundation that facilitates communication and understanding among diverse groups (Crane et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). Consequently, businesses and institutions adhering to True North principles tend to earn trust and maintain positive reputations, underlining trust's centrality in sustainable relationships (Adams et al., 2001).

Moreover, embracing True North enhances resilience, providing strength and clarity during challenging moral situations (George et al., 2010). Lastly, ethical thinking grounded in True North can drive innovation and progress, encouraging the responsible exploration and development of new ideas and technologies in alignment with societal values (Crane et al., 2019; Ferrell & Fraedrich, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). In the context of the dynamic technological landscape, 21st-century library and information professionals are tasked with adapting and embracing modern advancements, which is closely tied to the concept of finding True North in ethical practices. This adaptation includes utilising platforms such as social media and innovative information packaging techniques to enhance information dissemination and access. Additionally, librarians are encouraged to engage in advocacy, forge partnerships, and promote information literacy. These efforts are essential not only for meeting their clients' evolving demands but also for aligning their practices with ethical standards. By navigating this rapidly changing landscape while staying true to ethical principles, librarians can effectively serve their communities,

build trust, and uphold the core values that form their moral compass (Mason, 2017; Mwilongo, 2018). Thus, this intersection of technological progress and ethical integrity underscores the significance of finding True North in the evolving field of library and information services.

This study explores the ethical practices for information services provision at Makerere University Business School Library. Makerere University Business School Library (MUBS) is a prominent public university in Uganda, housing a well-equipped library facility that accommodates up to 1,500 users. This library, established in 2012, boasts extensive e-resource subscriptions, as well as free internet access, significantly enhancing academic resource accessibility. Despite embracing technology through services automation and repository implementation, challenges persist in information service provision at MUBS Library (MUBS Library, 2016). These challenges stand in contrast to the vision of well-educated and ethically-minded information professionals outlined by (Carlsson & Torngren, 2020; Johnson, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2020).

This research aimed to unearth the intricacies of information services at MUBS, unravel the foundational principles of ethical practices, scrutinise the ramifications of ethical dilemmas on information provision, and propose a robust ethical model for delivering information services. Ultimately, this research sought to empower librarians with the tools to deliver exceptional services, build trust, and positively impact their academic community and society at large.

Problem Statement

Libraries are pivotal in disseminating information and knowledge, serving as essential resources in academic institutions. However, in the digital age, the ethical dimensions of information services within libraries have gained increasing significance. MUBS library, like many others, faces ethical challenges in providing services to its diverse clientele. These challenges encompass issues such as intellectual freedom, intellectual property rights, privacy, and equitable access to information. Despite the recognition of the importance of ethics in librarianship, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies addressing the specific ethical practices and principles upheld by MUBS librarians. Moreover, the influence of technological advancements on these practices remains underexplored. To ensure that MUBS library continues to uphold the highest ethical

standards while adapting to the changing information landscape, there is a pressing need to investigate the current ethical practices and the factors shaping them.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the ethical practices of MUBS librarians and the fundamental principles that guide these practices. It aims to provide valuable insights into aligning these practices with global ethical standards and the influence of technology on ethical decision-making. Ultimately, this research contributes to enhancing ethical practices in MUBS library and informs the broader discourse on ethical considerations in contemporary librarianship.

Objectives

In pursuit of this aim, this paper examined the following research objectives:

1. To identify the range of information services provided by MUBS library;
2. To explore the core principles and ideals that underpin ethical practices in the MUBS library;
3. To determine the implications of ethical dilemmas on the provision of information services in the library.

Research questions

1. What are the various information services offered by MUBS library?
2. What are the fundamental principles that form the foundation of ethical practices within the MUBS library?
3. What are the implications and impacts of ethical dilemmas on the delivery of information services within the MUBS library?

Literature review

Information Services Provided by Academic Libraries

The literature on information services provided by academic libraries underscores their pivotal role in supporting the academic endeavours of students, faculty, and researchers. Academic libraries serve as vital hubs of knowledge dissemination, offering diverse services that cater to the evolving information needs of their user community (Ogba & Ikeazota, 2021). "Traditionally libraries were recognised as physical and cultural centres for the acquisition, organisation, storage and dissemination of knowledge services" (Rubin & Rubin, 2020, p. 59). Thus, these services encompass traditional functions such as lending print materials, reference assistance, and access to physical archives (Rubin, 2021). In addition, collection development still prevails as a core information service

that incorporates selecting and acquiring library materials to meet patron's needs (Carlsson & Tornngren, 2020; Jan & Ganiae, 2019). Moreover, abundant literature highlights several traditional information services such as reference services, digital resources, information literacy instruction, interlibrary loans, and special collections i.e., rare books, manuscripts, or archives that can be publicly open or restricted to researchers (Abumeeiz & Wingreen-Mason, 2020; Anhwere et al., 2019; Edwin & Banleman, 2015). Suffice it to note that Rubin & Rubin (2020) aver that "today libraries are still respected cultural institutions and a powerful physical presence, but their monopoly on knowledge is gone due to the proliferation of information technology communication" (p. 60).

Consequently, in response to the digital age, academic libraries have adapted by offering cutting-edge digital resources, including e-books, online databases, and scholarly journals. A recent study in Kuwait academic libraries revealed the provision of electronic information resources and services to students through the use of social media platforms to promote and provide outreach services to patrons (AlAwadhi & Al-Daihani, 2019). Furthermore, the advent of deluging data, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning technologies also saw their way into library science the enthusiastic library professionals. Several authors promulgate and expound on the immensely positive impact of such digital technologies in analysing large datasets such as patron book borrowing to train, learn and predict future patron needs (Hooper, 2023). Equally important, libraries are propelling their information services delivery by leveraging artificial intelligence such as generative AI (chatGPT) in collection development (Lund & Wang, 2023). Subsequently, the use of AI in libraries has been observed in library systems, descriptive cataloguing, subject indexing, reference services, technical services, shelf reading, collection development, and information retrieval systems (Oname & Alex-Nmecha, 2020, p. 4). Moreover, numerous authors have collectively discussed data visualisation, data curation, and research data management skills as services and their interoperable relationship nexus to library information services provision in academic settings (Ssekitto & Mukiibi, 2023; Virkus & Garoufallou, 2019, 2020).

Moreover, the transition from print to digital formats has prompted libraries to provide extensive training in information literacy, equipping users with the skills to critically evaluate and effectively utilise information sources (Kiconco, 2018; Mwilongo,

2018). Additionally, user-centric services like interlibrary loans, document delivery, and tailored research consultations enhance academic research and learning experiences (Lo et al., 2016; Makula & Turner, 2022). Despite challenges posed by budget constraints and rapid technological changes, academic libraries continue to evolve, embracing technology while upholding their core mission of facilitating access to reliable and diverse information resources (DiGiovanni, 2020; Lo et al., 2016).

Principles That Underpin Ethical Practices in Academic Libraries

Ethical practices within academic libraries encompass not only information ethics, focusing on the responsible use of information, intellectual property, censorship, data integrity, privacy, and access to information, but also the application of professional ethics guiding the actions and decisions of library and information professionals. Johnson (2014) highlights several influential factors shaping information ethical practices in the contemporary world.

Globalisation, characterised by extensive information and communication technology usage, openness, and information sharing, has led to increased conflict among individuals and societies vying for dominance (Carlsson & Torngren, 2020). Additionally, the rise of individualism prompts a growing demand for personalized services in academic libraries (Carlsson & Torngren, 2020). As the world becomes increasingly networked, privacy and information security concerns escalate, presenting challenges for libraries entrusted with safeguarding sensitive data (Kiconco, 2018; Virkus & Garoufallou, 2019). Modern library professionals are burdened with diverse responsibilities, serving not only as information providers but also as educators, consultants, technology experts, and more, necessitating the acquisition of new skills (Carlsson & Torngren, 2020).

The clash between the 'right to information' and the 'ethical use of information' poses ethical dilemmas for library and information professionals, who must navigate the fine line between ensuring access to information and protecting restricted data (Rubin & Rubin, 2020). Therefore, the issue of universal access to information presents further complexities, as providing free and public access may strain resources, potentially undermining the viability of information centres (Edwin & Banleman, 2015; Safii, 2019). Furthermore, with the advent of new technologies, the ease of information reproduction, such as

photocopying and scanning, raises concerns over intellectual property rights for authors and publishers (Carlsson & Torngren, 2020). This tension between information accessibility and respecting intellectual ownership challenges information professionals to strike a balance in ethical information practices.

Implications of Ethical Dilemmas on the Provision of Information Services in Academic Libraries

Navigating the implications of ethical dilemmas in information services provision entails grappling with a complex array of challenges where ethically driven solutions may clash with other regulatory principles. Mason (2017) and Rubin (2021) highlight conflicts between information ethics and law, market principles, and technological advancements, further compounded by conflicts between law and market, law and technologies, and market and technologies. Mishna et al. (2021) emphasise the influence of factors such as religion, age, race, nationality, social, and economic backgrounds on individuals' ethical perspectives, leading to differing views on what constitutes 'right' and 'ethical' actions. The moral responsibility of information professionals, guided by professional codes, necessitates the development of individual ethical sensibilities through education and training (Mwilongo, 2018), although the unequal distribution of education among librarians may hinder consistent ethical implementation (Xu Wenjing, 2015). Furthermore, drawing on their training, reference librarians, as revealed by Hendrigan, (2020), are better equipped to recognise and address ethical issues related to copyright, confidentiality, and privacy. Furthermore, user satisfaction with library services is significantly influenced by the quality of staff and services, highlighting the importance of well-qualified, experienced staff in providing ethical information services (Dabiri, 2016; Sanjay, 2016; Zhou, 2018). However, access to the internet varies across international library communities, raising concerns about filtering software used to protect children and uphold public morality and religious values. Challenges in developing an information code of ethics in Uganda arise from selfishness among professional organisations and institutions and socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions (Kosciejew, 2020).

Despite the availability of ethical codes in electronic format, Lo et al. (2016) reveal that many information professionals lack awareness and interest in them, potentially hindering ethical implementation. Navalta et al. (2019) further highlight that the lack

of popularity of ethical codes for librarians poses a barrier to implementing ethical practices in libraries. In this evolving information landscape, the growth of information technology and the increasing value of information in decision-making raise ethical concerns about the privacy of personal information held in databases (Kiconco, 2018; Sabhapandit, 2019). Moreover, the coexistence of written and unwritten ethical rules, institutionalised and individual professional principles, leads to ethical tension in information institutions and among professionals (Johnson, 2014; Mason, 2017; Navalta et al., 2019).

Methodology

To comprehensively investigate ethical practices in information service provision at MUBS library, this research adopted qualitative methods, employing a participant-cantered approach to interpret findings from the perspective of those directly involved. A diverse group of 54 informants, including 32 MUBS Library staff members, 20 MBA students, an administrative staff representative, and a lecturer, participated in face-to-face interviews. These interviews facilitated profound discussions, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, opinions, and perspectives concerning ethical practices in library services at MUBS. On-site observations conducted within the MUBS library environment involved close examination of various aspects of ethical practices and interactions. These observations provided first-hand insights into the real-world ethical dilemmas and behaviours exhibited by library staff and users. Thorough analysis of relevant documents, including the Public Service Code, annual reports, and library assessment reports, contributed to the research. By interpreting and analysing these documents, insights into the broader ethical standards and guidelines that shape library practices were gained. These documents served as a foundation for understanding the formal ethical framework within which the MUBS library operates. The research procedures were meticulously designed to ensure the systematic and ethical conduct of the study. After obtaining necessary permissions, a pilot study was carried out to refine the research instruments. The findings from interview questions were analysed thematically, and this approach allowed for robust conclusions to be drawn from comments made by multiple respondents. Throughout the study, ethical considerations were rigorously upheld to safeguard confidentiality and rights, resulting in a systematic and comprehensive examination of ethical

practices within the MUBS library.

Results and discussion

Results and discussions were guided by the objectives phrased as (1) information services provided; (2) core principles affecting information service provision; (3) implications of ethical dilemmas to service delivery; and, 4) ethical model. Thusly described below:

Results and discussion of research questions

First question

In response to the first research question, "What are the various information services offered by MUBS library?" the researcher conducted document reviews, interviews with MBA students and lecturers and observations to uncover the range of information services provided to patrons by the MUBS library. The findings illuminated a comprehensive array of services available within the MUBS library context, including textbooks and eBooks short-term loan; reference books and e-reference books; internet and WIFI; current awareness; interlibrary loan; journals and e-journals access to clients; reading and discussion space; printed book long term loan (12 weeks); photocopy, printing, and scanning; user education; selective dissemination of information; the arrangement of reference collections for ease of use; answering questions and fulfilling user's information needs; indexing services; direct personal assistance to readers seeking information; library and community linkage; and abstracting services. Raised below are some of the comments raised from two respondents on information services offered by MUBS library:

S1 Well... the library offers various services, including short-term borrowing of textbooks and eBooks for exams. The library as well offers reading and discussion spaces for projects and extended borrowing of printed books. Secondly, the library offered space for photocopying, printing, scanning, and other secretarial bureaus.

L1 MUBS library excels in services, with access to textbooks (both print and electronic) and a significant reference material collection for research. Their internet and Wi-Fi services are robust to both students and facilitators. Interlibrary loans from The Main Library of Makerere University also facilitates access to materials such as journals for research. My take lastly, is on reading and discussion spaces provided are very conducive to users.

Second question

“What are the fundamental principles that form the foundation of ethical practices within the MUBS library?” Addressing the second research question, the study aimed to uncover the principles and ideals guiding ethical practices in the MUBS library context. Through interviews with 20 library staff, the researcher delved into the core values that serve as the bedrock of ethical conduct within the library.

The identified principles include providing equitable services, emphasising the importance of fair and unbiased access to resources for all users. Protecting personal data shared between individuals and institutions emerged as a critical principle, highlighting the commitment to safeguarding user information. Ensuring access to information for personal and societal development underscored the library’s role in fostering knowledge dissemination and societal progress. Moreover, the library respects personal privacy, maintains confidentiality, and

creates a safe environment for information seekers. Personal integrity and professional competence were emphasised, reflecting the librarians’ dedication to upholding high standards of conduct. Treating library users fairly and respectfully was another fundamental principle, promoting positive interactions and user satisfaction. The principles also extend to supporting open access and intellectual property initiatives, contributing to the broader academic community and sustainability.

Lastly, the librarians were committed to shun corruption and other vices in the public interest, highlighting their dedication to upholding ethical standards. These principles collectively form the foundation of ethical practices within the MUBS library, guiding librarians in their interactions, decisions, and service provision. The following are a few extracts taken from the participant’s responses to the questions in the interview to illustrate the attitude they demonstrated:

S1 *Well... the library offers various services, including short-term borrowing of textbooks and eBooks for exams. The library as well offers reading and discussion spaces for projects and extended borrowing of printed books. Secondly, the library offered space for photocopying, printing, scanning, and other secretarial bureaus.*

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S4	<i>I give credit to this library when it comes to availing us with research reports which are so vital in our research work and especially when writing our journal articles and this shows that there is some aspect of ethical practices in MUBS Library</i>
LA	<i>More training should be put in place to enable librarians to improve on ethical practices and to make them to know the importance of observing the code of ethics in information service delivery. In addition, organize seminars for librarians on issues relating to ethical practices</i>
L2	<i>The library should pin its ethical code in the board room to remind librarians to avoid misconduct. In addition, all library users should be given copies of the ethical code of conduct to guide them in observing ethical practices in MUBS Library</i>

Third question

“What are the implications and impacts of ethical dilemmas on the delivery of information services within the MUBS library?” The third research question was to determine the implications of ethical dilemmas on information service provision in the MUBS Library. The researcher was able to achieve this objective by conducting interviews. The respondents acknowledged that their provisions of information services were severely affected and pointed out demotivated library staff; a limited number of qualified staff; social and cultural factors; the complexity of the

library code of ethics; awareness of the ethical code of ethics; advancement in information technology; longstanding codes of ethics from international library associations; internet access; conflicts with other regulations and laws; unpopularity of ethical codes; enforcement of ethical conducts by library managements; existence of outdated information resources especially text books. The following are a few extracts taken from the participant’s responses to the questions in the interview to illustrate the attitude they demonstrated:

S8	<i>The staff members of MUBS Library are rude to the clients especially those librarians who look frustrated as if we are the ones who frustrate them. Such a habit must stop in this library because we are tired of being harassed as if we were kids</i>
L3	<i>There is a limited number of qualified staff who are to work in the library only. The number of staff is small and to make matters worse, there are few staff members in this library serving very many students hence making the staff offer substandard services.</i>
L4	<i>According to me, in most cases our level of adherence to ethical practices is determined by how we were trained in our religions and family background, which means that social and cultural factors highly influence information services provision ethically at MUBS Library.</i>
L5	<i>It is not easy to understand ethical codes since there is complexity of the code of ethics with many rules or codes that makes us to forget some codes.</i>
L6	<i>Some of the ethical codes are too complex for some library staff to comprehend and this makes them not to practice what is preached in these codes of ethics</i>
S12	<i>This library is well built and organized but information resources are not enough and others that are available are old, for example, the textbooks are too old and whenever we quote them as references, lecturers reject them, hence, leading to poor performance in course works and delays in research proposal writing</i>
L12	<i>Hmn... here we do not have Ugandan based code of ethics for librarians and the international codes that are available are not taken seriously by most of us after all Uganda as a country does not have one, an implication that following library ethics is optional and not a must though we try to follow the IFLA Code of ethics</i>

The findings of this study, which explored the information services offered by MUBS library, align well with the existing literature on library services in educational institutions. These services reflect the library's commitment to supporting teaching, research, and learning activities by providing comprehensive resources and tools. The study's results resonate with previous research that emphasises the role of libraries in enhancing access to information and facilitating the academic success of students and faculty members (Kiconco, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2020; Sabhapandit, 2019). This echoes the broader discussions on libraries' roles as information hubs and centres for academic excellence (Johnson, 2014; Kiconco, 2018). The core principles and ethical practices uncovered in this study resonate with the foundational values advocated by library associations and ethical frameworks in the field. Johnson (2014) and Lo et al. (2016) concur that the emphasis on intellectual freedom, equitable access, privacy protection, and honesty among librarians aligns with the American Library Association's Code of Ethics and IFLA (IFLA, 2021).

The commitment to promoting social inclusion and eradicating discrimination mirrors the principles of librarianship as outlined by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). These findings underscore the importance of ethical conduct within library settings and the broader discussions on libraries' crucial role in ensuring democratic access to information while upholding ethical standards. Regarding ethical dilemmas, the study's findings provide insights into the intricate nature of ethical decision-making in libraries. The dilemmas identified, such as balancing intellectual freedom and censorship, mirror discussions in information ethics literature (Johnson, 2014). These findings underscore the challenges librarians face in navigating the evolving landscape of digital information and technology while upholding ethical standards (Danladi, 2015; DiGiovanni, 2020; Koscieljew, 2020).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study delved into the realm of ethical practices and information services within the context of the MUBS library. The findings shed light on the diverse range of information services the library provides, encompassing digital resources, physical materials, user education, and more. The core principles underpinning ethical practices were identified, highlighting the commitment of MUBS librarians to principles such as equitable access,

privacy protection, and user-centred service. The study also illuminated the ethical dilemmas faced by librarians in their pursuit of balancing intellectual freedom with responsible information provision.

The alignment of these findings with existing literature reinforces the global nature of ethical considerations and the critical role of libraries as guardians of information and knowledge dissemination. As technology continues to reshape the information landscape, the ethical dimensions of librarianship gain even more significance. The study's insights into the challenges faced by MUBS librarians in their decision-making process provide valuable context for understanding the dynamic interplay between ethical principles, institutional policies, and user expectations.

This research contributes to the scholarly discourse on library ethics and offers practical implications for MUBS library administrators, librarians, and users. This study paves the way for informed discussions and potential enhancements in ethical practices and service quality by highlighting the ethical foundations of their services and the dilemmas they navigate.

In a world where information is both a valuable resource and a potential source of ethical challenges, the findings of this study underscore the enduring importance of ethical practices and the pivotal role of librarians in shaping an informed and responsible society. By striving to uphold ethical values while providing quality services, MUBS librarians contribute to enriching academic experiences and the broader pursuit of knowledge.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations were suggested to enhance ethical practices and information services at MUBS library:

Training and sensitisation: MUBS librarians should undergo regular training and sensitisation programs on ethical principles and practices in librarianship. This will help ensure that they stay updated with evolving ethical considerations in the field.

User education

The library should prioritise user education programs to create awareness among patrons about the library's information services and the ethical responsibilities of both librarians and users.

Ethical guidelines

MUBS library should develop and implement comprehensive ethical guidelines and policies. These should cover issues such as intellectual freedom, privacy, and intellectual property rights, providing a clear framework for ethical decision-making.

Technology integration

The library should explore the integration of technology to enhance its information services while ensuring the ethical use and management of digital resources.

User feedback mechanisms

Establish mechanisms for users to provide feedback on ethical concerns or dilemmas they encounter in the library. This will facilitate continuous improvement.

Areas of future study/ research

Further research opportunities emerge from this study. A deeper exploration of the role of technology in shaping ethical practices and decision-making within libraries could provide valuable insights, especially in the context of the digital age. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of library users on ethical conduct and the quality of services they receive could offer a well-rounded understanding of the impact of ethical practices on user satisfaction and engagement.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to declare

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