

MOTIVATION AND BENEFITS OF ISO 9001:2015 IMPLEMENTATION AND MAINTENANCE IN A MALAYSIAN LEGAL FIRM

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Abstract. This research is an insider action qualitative case study research on a legal Firm X in Malaysia which has implemented, obtained certification and maintained the ISO 9001:2015 quality management system (QMS). Data was collected from interviews, document reviews and observations that were conducted from October until December 2020. It was found that there are eight internal motivations and five external motivations for ISO 9001:2015 implementation and maintenance. Internal motivations are that the ISO 9001 standard creates work processes, to have a systematic and organised workflow followed by the intention to improve productivity and quality of work in Firm X. Other motivational factors are to have an efficient operation, a faster delivery of work, to create and follow the standard template, staff empowerment, and to gain knowledge on ISO. On the other hand, the external motivation factors are for global recognition, to secure panelship, differentiating factors, to win client trust and for business benefits. The benefits obtained by Firm X includes "systematic working process", "standard procedure", "standard documentation" and "quality delivery" where ISO implementation procedures increase the firm's efficiency, decrease non-conformities, the costs related to reworks and to sustain the relationship with the customer. Global recognition, securing panelship, differentiating factor, client trust and business benefits are the external benefits obtained from Firm X's implementation and maintenance of ISO 9001:2015 quality management system.

Keywords: *ISO 9001, quality management system, legal firm, motivation of ISO 9001, benefits of ISO 9001*

Introduction

As of 31st December 2019, 883,521 ISO 9001 certificates were issued to organizations worldwide (ISO, 2021). The number of ISO 9001:2015 certified organizations provide evidence of worldwide recognition and acceptance of ISO 9001:2015 standard by organizations as an internationally accepted common framework of standards that enables mutual trust and reliance. It allows customers to trust the quality-oriented performance of the organizations that subscribe to the standard and the accrediting certification agencies. In Malaysia, through the Standards of Malaysia Act 1966 (Act 549), the Department of Standards Malaysia (DSM) is mandated by the government as the National Standards Body (NSB) as well as the National Accreditation Body of the country. According to the DSM report, 8,563 organizations were certified to ISO 9001:2015 in Malaysia by the end of 2020 (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2021).

A lot of research has been done on the implementation and maintenance of ISO 9001:2015 standards in multiple service sectors worldwide. For example; on benefits (Casadesus and Gimenez, 2000), the difficulties (Yahya and Goh, 2001), overcoming the barriers (Zeng et al., 2007), the outcome of implementation (Lee et al., 2009), the critical factors (Psomas et al., 2010), the impact of implementation (Srivastav, 2010),

the effect on customer satisfaction (Priede, 2012) , the hindrance factors (Mendes and Lourenco, 2014), the framework for small companies (Sawant, 2016), the effect on customer satisfaction in engineering services (Hadidi et al., 2017), the supporting factors (Almeida et al., 2018) and the drivers, benefits and barriers of ISO 9001 implementation (Bravi et al., 2019). However, very few studies had been carried out on ISO 9001 implementation in legal firms (Prashar, 2020). Therefore, by conducting this study and identifying the motivation and benefits of ISO 9001:2015 implementation and maintenance, it will contribute to and minimize the gap in the literature.

Literature review

Legal firms and ISO 9001 in Malaysia

In 2019, the Malaysian Bar Council took the initiative to create a committee to study quality management in legal firms to find a solution for managing risks and improving overall service quality of legal firms. According to the Malaysian Bar Official Portal (2021), there are 6,460 legal firms in Malaysia. Out of this, about 88.0% are categorised as small firms (1-5 lawyers), 11.4% as medium firms (6-30 lawyers) and 0.6% are big firms (>31 lawyers). Although Malaysia has a total of 6,060 legal firms (Malaysian Bar Official Portal, 2021) and the number increased to 6,460 (Malaysian Bar Official Portal, 2021), only one legal firm is certified to the ISO 9001:2015 (*Figure 1*). Previously, two other legal firms were ISO 9001 certified, but none of them has transitioned to ISO 9001:2015 standards. The Bar Council Secretariat, being the management body regulating the legal profession in Malaysia was certified to the ISO 9001:2000 in the year 2007 but later did not continue the certification to the later version. In 2008, the government through SMIDEC (now known as SME Corporation), the government agency in charge of the Small Medium Enterprises, offered a partial grant in the form of 50% of the costs of ISO 9001 certification to encourage professionals, including legal firms to subscribe to ISO 9001. Despite the government effort, only one legal firm took up the grant. Furthermore, the challenges in maintaining the ISO 9001 in Malaysia were evident with 1,496 ISO 9001 certificates being withdrawn between 2015 to 2019 (ISO, 2021). *Figure 1* shows the number of ISO 9001: 2015 certified organisations in Malaysia.



Figure 1. *ISO 9001:2015 certified organisations in Malaysian Bar Official Portal (2021 and ISO (2021) (ISO, 2021; Malaysian Bar, 2021).*

In terms of classification, legal firms fall under the service category. Ritsema et al. (1991) defined professional service organization including legal firms as "The provision of services by one or more persons who are considered competent in a certain field of knowledge, acquired by prolonged training and having the skills to apply this knowledge in practice." For service, evaluation of quality and customer satisfaction is a difficult task as it involves not only the outcome but the manner the service is delivered. Service quality is essentially perception-based and has been defined as the gap between consumers' expectations and the actual service performance they received (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The difficulty in evaluating service quality is due to the intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of service character (Prashar, 2020; Hrniciar et al., 2018). Legal firms are recommended to implement a quality management system to bridge the gap between what the client perceives as quality legal services provided by the entire firm; by lawyers, paralegal, receptionist, and even a delivery person, matching or exceeding client expectations. The main issue in the legal profession is resistance to change of any kind and acknowledgement of this fact is the first step for implementation of ISO (Abraham et al., 1998).

Motivation for ISO 9001 implementation

Quality Management development is driven by competition with the goal to achieve competitive advantage to face global challenges (Elshaer and Augustyn, 2016; Weckenmann et al., 2015). In America, in order to survive, legal firms adopt the system that can increase efficiencies (Garrett, 1992). According to the literature, the motivation to implement the ISO 9001 quality management system can be derived internally or by external factors (Bravi et al., 2019; Rebelo et al., 2017). Internally, it was found that the motivation is for improved customer service (Hadidi et al., 2017; Nabavi et al., 2014; Caro and Gracia, 2009); process improvement (Sun and Pang, 2017; Buttle, 1997); organisational efficiency (Muhammad et al., 2009); reduced costs (Heras et al., 2002) and awareness on quality issues (Ghobadian et al., 1994). The external factors include anticipated customers' demand, customer pressures, to qualify for bidding and to be considered in tenders (Sweis et al., 2020; Kakouris and Sfakianaki, 2018; Juanzon and Muhi, 2017; Buttle, 1997), an increase in market share (Karim, 2015), and as a marketing tool that enhances its image to customers (Kok, 2019; Ab Wahid and Corner, 2009). Casadesus and Gimenez (2000) suggests that organisations pursue certification if there is a demand for certification from customers; for its certification is a costly affair. Organisations should not do it based on an inflated expectation of sales or profitability improvement, although the cost benefits certification is, on average, sufficient to cover the investment costs. The researcher agrees with the findings that firms with superior performance are more likely to have certification, not the other way. However, the researcher agrees that the implementation of QMS promotes sustainability (Santos et al., 2014) and Corporate Social Responsibility in a larger corporation (Bravi et al., 2019). Implementation is motivated for a better quality of life (Srivastav, 2010). Harte and Dale (1995) found that the motivation for quality system implementation is as a method to manage business to face competition.

Kakouris and Sfakianaki (2018) identified primary and secondary motivation for certification in that organisation developed additional motivations after seeing the

benefits of ISO certification. The ISO certification's full potential will be realised by organisations that pursue certification for a holistic and progressive organisational improvement against external motivation of the organisation as a quick fix. According to Bravi et al. (2019), the most important reasons that led Small Medium Enterprises in Italy to get ISO 9001 certification are the possibility of improving their corporate image, obtaining internal organisational improvements, and the opportunity to use the standard as a marketing tool. Two out of three of the main reasons are linked to external factors.

Benefits and improvements of ISO 9001 implementation

The benefits of ISO 9001 implementation go beyond the organisation towards society and the nation. Effective implementation of ISO leads to an efficient process and to achieving business goals (Sickinger and Schwanke, 2016). There is lots of literature on the implementation of ISO 9001 standard, and many researchers found a positive impact of implementing ISO 9001 on organisations, including profit improvement, process improvement, and marketing benefits (Fonseca et al., 2019; Hussain et al., 2018; Buttle, 1997). Some of the positive impacts are on financial performance (Karim, 2015); positive outcome, including competitive performance and economic benefits (Weckenmann et al., 2015); and maximises customer satisfaction, internalisation, and improved performance (Heras-Saizarbitoria and Boiral, 2015).

According to Karim (2015), motivation for implementation has a great bearing on organisation experience benefits and improvement from ISO. The organisation motivation that is in line with ISO and business goals coupled with its systems allows improvement that is beyond certification, which leads to improving quality by compliance. The author disagrees that ISO would directly lead to competitive advantage in organisations due to the generic nature of ISO, and it does not fulfil the variables of competitive advantage laid by Porter et al. (1985) of not being easily duplicable. However, how a recommendation to abandon ISO certification would benefit organisations in achieving financial improvement and competitive advantage is beyond logic. Based on the studies by Heras et al. (2002) and Dimara et al. (2004), ISO certification gives strategic advantages to certified organisations that lead to competitive advantage and financial improvements.

Fonseca et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive study on the transition and certification process from ISO 9001:2008 to the revised ISO 9001:2015 from several countries and sectors, spanning a spectrum of sizes of organisations, and found that benefits from ISO 9001:2015 transitions include alignment with risk management and knowledge management systems. In another study, ISO 9001 implementation and continuous maintenance of the ISO 9001 standard were beneficial in improving legal firms' productivity in Australia. The benefits to legal firms include cost savings, improved communications with clients, and improved quality culture (Prajogo, 2008). Can it do the same for Malaysian legal firms? Psomas et al. (2010) found that ISO 9001 benefits employees as it was easier to settle disputes, easy to follow, more systematic, easier to do jobs, and easier for newcomers to do jobs. It promoted inter-role and interdepartmental cooperation, which leads to strengthening the culture of collaboration in the organisation. It is also seen as a stress balancer and promotes human well-being in the organisation, while simultaneously increasing the functionality of organisational culture, climate, and coping strategy that ultimately facilitates organisational development (Srivastav, 2010).

Based on a case study on a highway maintenance service organisation, ISO implementation and maintenance results in the following improvements: (1) work becomes more systematic; (2) improved record and tracing of work; (3) analysis could be done; (4) better acquaintance with the quality policy; (5) procedures and job scope; (6) reduce overlapping of functions and role; (7) easier for management with the improved record and tracking, traffic management, and control; (8) suppliers and subcontractors; (9) monitoring and reward for staff; (10) improvement in revenue and profit before tax; (11) increase in volume and scope of business; (12) improved service quality; (13) decrease in operating cost; and (14) making measurement of organisation's performance possible (Ab Wahid and Corner, 2009).

Materials and Methods

This research is a combination of an insider action research (IAR) popularised by Coghlan (2019) and a qualitative single case study design as prescribed by Yin (2018). The insider action research is whereby an individual employee undertakes research as part of an academic programme to fulfil requirements for academic certification (Gosling and Ashton, 1994; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 1994). Furthermore, IAR aims to study their own actions to change or improve the working of some aspects of the system and study the process in order to learn from it. Hence, action research is akin to experiential learning and reflective practice (Coghlan, 2019). A case study is a suitable method to understand complex social phenomena and to identify unique cases (Yin, 2018; 1981a; 1981b), and the objectives of the study involve in-depth insights into a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The case study method is selected over other methods because of the preferred and ideal strategy when "what", "how" (Robson, 2002) and "why" questions are being posed (Yin, 2018). This strategy will allow the researcher to determine what happened and why it happened (Yin, 2018). A multi-case study cannot be done as there is only one legal firm that is ISO 9001:2015 certified. The experience of a legal firm (Firm X) was critically reviewed in terms of its motivation, benefits, critical success factors and problems relating to the implementation and maintenance of ISO 9001:2015. However, this paper reports only on the motivation and benefits aspects of ISO 9001:2015 implementation and maintenance at Firm X.

Data were collected from interviews, document reviews and observations that were carried out from October until December 2020. For the interview, 10 respondents were selected that consist of a partner, three associates (one from the litigation department, one from the conveyancing department, and one from the corporate department), two legal secretaries (from the litigation and conveyancing department) and three managers from the administrative department (the administrative manager, accounts manager and account executive). A chambering student was also made a respondent. Some of the documents reviewed are Quality Policy Statement (QPS), Quality Manual (QM), Quality Procedures (QP), Administrative Manual (AM), General Manual (GM), Risks Opportunities and Register (ROR), External audits (Ea), and Opportunity for Improvement (OI). In terms of observation, this case study has an overall observation on Firm X's office physical appearance, infrastructure and people behaviour and attitude towards ISO. For data analysis, ATLAS-ti software and excel spreadsheet were used to codify and categorise large amounts of data collected from open-ended interviews. On noting the patterns, themes, contrast, comparisons, clustering and counting, an inference and conclusion are drawn. The early conclusion is confirmed by

follow up interviews, triangulating, making if-then tests and checking out rival explanations from literature. The conclusion is described and summed against other literature findings and theories by narrative. During this narrative, thinking and analysis happen (Coghlan, 2019; Miles et al., 1994).

Case organisation

Firm X is in the category of medium-firm (6-30 lawyers) and the only legal firm in Malaysia at the point of research that is ISO 9001:2015 certified. It has undergone three-time re-certification audits in 2013, 2016 and 2019 as each certificate is valid for three years. Firm X underwent eleven yearly surveillance audits by the SIRIM QAS as the certification body. Firm X has implemented and maintained the ISO 9001 certification for ten years and can be said to have attained maturity. The scope of certification is for the provision of Legal services covering Conveyancing and Litigation. The firm has dealt with matters in the following fields: (1) Sale and Purchase Transaction; (2) Residential Commercial & corporate loan transactions (conventional & Islamic); (3) Land Law matters; (4) Deeds and Agreements; (5) Will, Probate and Letter of Administration; (6) Employment Law; (7) Environmental Law; (8) Intellectual Property Law; (9) Family Law; (10) Personal Injury; (11) Building & Construction Law; and (12) Construction Law.

Firm X has two offices: the Head Quarters in Pandan Indah, Kuala Lumpur and a branch in Ampang, Selangor. There is 12 staff in Firm X comprising three partners, three associates, two secretary and three administrative staff and one delivery person. There are five departments in Firm X. They are Conveyancing, Litigation, Corporate, Syariah and Administrative Department. Each department is led by an Associate and monitored by a Partner. The Partners consultation board governs Firm X's operation. A Syariah advisory executive was appointed in July, 2020 to advice on Syariah critical points and compliance matters. There are five departments in Firm X which are Conveyancing, Litigation, Corporate, Syariah and Administrative Department. Each department is handled by the Head of the Department.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

There are ten respondents selected for this study consisting of a partner, three associates, two legal secretaries, three managers and one chambering student. Three of the respondents have been with the firm since its inception in 2010. Eighty per cent of the respondents have been in the firm for more than a year and on a full-time basis. Sixty per cent of the respondents are from the headquarters and the rest from the Branch. Ninety per cent of the respondents are female. All the respondents are between 25 to 40 years old. Two out of ten respondents are with Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) certificates, while eighty percent of staff possess diplomas and degrees in various fields. According to R1 (a partner), a Master degree in any field is a minimum requirement to be invited as a partner in firm X. *Table 1* shows the details of respondents.

Table 1. Details of respondents.

No.	Position in firm	Years in the firm	Permanent (P) or Temporary (T)	Age	Education	Office location	Interview date
R1	Partner	>10	P	37	Master	Branch	2/10/2020

R2	Associates	< 2	P	25	Degree	HQ	11/12/2020
R3	Administrative manager	> 5	P	28	Diploma	HQ	16/11/2020 11/12/2020
R4	Legal secretary	> 10	P	40	Diploma	HQ	4/10/2020 7/12/2020
R5	Associates	< 2	P	24	Degree	HQ	15/11/2020 11/12/2929
R6	Accounts executive	< 1	P	32	Certificate in Information Technology	HQ	9/10/2020 11/12/2020
R7	Legal secretary	> 5	P	39	Diploma	Branch	9/10/2020 11/12/2020
R8	Associates	< 3	P	27	Degree	Branch	12/10/2020 11/12/2020
R9	Chambering students	< 1	T	23	Degree	Branch	12/10/2020 11/12/2020
R10	Accounts	> 10	T	40	SPM, certificate in Office Management	HQ	9/10/2020 11/12/2020

Motivation for certification

Based on the literature, the motivation for ISO certification can be both internal and external to the firm. In this study, three (3) questions were posed on motivation: ‘Who came up with the implementation idea?’, ‘How did the Firm develop an interest in ISO?’, and ‘What motivated the Firm to implement ISO? The idea for the implementation of the ISO 9001 quality management system came from the top management, referred to by the respondents in their answers as ‘*Managing Partner, Senior Partner, and management level*’. According to R1 (a Partner), the firm developed an interest in ISO under the grounds of ‘*to apply for panelship, to ensure the consistency of work by staff, and more opportunities for improvement of the work process*’. Out of twenty-one responses given by the respondents, fourteen or two-third of the responses referred to internal reasons as the motivation factor for ISO implementation in Firm X (*Table 2*). In addition, from the responses, the said internal factors can be categorised into eight categories and there are shows in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Internal motivation factors for implementation and maintenance of ISO 9001:2015 in Firm X.

Item	Internal motivation factors	Respondents	Frequency
1	Improve work process	R1, R2, R3, R10	4
2	Systematic and organised work	R3, R4, R7	3
3	Improve productivity and quality of work	R6, R9	2
4	Efficient operation	R4	1
5	Faster delivery of work	R4	1
6	Empowerment of staff	R4	1
7	Standard template	R1	1
8	Knowledge on ISO	R7	1
Total			14

It is identified that to ‘improve work process’ is the most important motivation factor chosen for the implementation and maintenance of ISO 9001:2015 in Firm X. The second factor is to have a systematic and organised workflow followed by the intention to improve productivity and quality of work in Firm X. Other motivational factors are to have an efficient operation, a faster delivery of work, to create and follow the standard

template, staff empowerment, and to gain knowledge on ISO. On the other hand, only seven out of the twenty-one responses mentioned external motivation factors. The most important external motivation factor is for global recognition and to secure panelship. This is followed by differentiating factors which are to win client trust and business benefits (*Table 3*).

Table 3. *External motivation factors for implementation and maintenance of ISO 9001:2015 in Firm X.*

Item	External motivation factors	Respondents	Frequency
1	Global recognition	R1, R7	2
2	Panelship requirement	R3, R10	2
3	Differentiating factor	R5	1
4	To win client trust	R9	1
5	Business benefits	R2	1
Total			7

In addition, R9 (a senior partner) goes on to say that ‘*The firm is interested in attracting panels from various sources like construction companies and government agencies. Implementation of the ISO will ensure that the panel could put their trust in the Firm to deliver the service in a high-quality manner*’. The first research question is “*Why does Legal Firm X implement and maintain the ISO 9001:2015?*” As seen from the findings, Firm X is internally and externally motivated in its effort to obtain ISO certification. The implementation derived from internal motivation is to improve the work process. The internal motivation factors include efficient operation, a faster delivery of work, to create and follow partner pre-approved standard templates, staff empowerment, and to gain knowledge on ISO, which improves Firm X’s delivery system. The internal motivation appears to result in the certification and maintenance in Firm X. This corroborates previous literature findings that sustainability of ISO maintenance is higher where it is inclined towards internal motivation than being externally enforced (Psomas et al., 2010).

The external motivation factors for Firm X are securing panelship, global recognition, differentiating factor, client trust, and business benefits, all of which correspond with current literature (Karim, 2015; Leung et al., 1999). However, securing panelship found in legal Firm X may be an external motivation specific to professional legal service. The interview results show that the implementation and maintenance of the ISO system has improved the work process and results in consistent delivery of the services to clients. This benefitted Firm X in the area of client satisfaction of its services by reducing the number of customer complaints while increasing client compliments. Firm X has also successfully used the ISO system to achieve the objectives of certification as a marketing tool based on the increase in numbers of panelship, and expansion of business and clientele showing positive impact of implementing ISO 9001 on organisations (Fonseca et al., 2019).

Benefits and improvements of ISO 9001:2015 implementation

When asked if Firm X obtains benefits from the ISO 9001 implementation, all staff confirmed that Firm X does obtain benefits from the implementation. According to them, the benefits of ISO 9001 implementation to the firm are both of external and internal nature.

Internal benefits

Majority of the staff recognised the internal benefits of ISO 9001 on Firm X, such as it creates “systematic working process”, “standard procedure”, “standard documentation” and “quality delivery”. The findings are similar to previous studies conducted by Sweis et al. (2020) in the engineering consulting firms where ISO implementation procedures increased the firms’ efficiency, decreased non-conformities and the costs related to reworks, and sustained the relationship with the customer. The advantages of certification were achieved when the motivations were to generate internal development, operational, and organisational improvements (Sampaio et al., 2009).

External benefits

On the other hand, the external benefits derived from ISO 9001 implementation to the firm described by the respondents are the firm is “different from other firms”, recognition by clients, and business opportunities increment of panelship on a yearly basis. *Table 4* shows that in 2010, there were five-panelship and in 2020, the number increases to twenty-five panelship appointments. Also, in the year 2020, there is a ten per cent rejection rate compared to 80% rejection in 2010. The increase in panelship in Firm X confirms that the ISO certification is effective as a marketing tool due to clients’ perception of high service quality provided by the firm (Santos et al., 2014).

Table 4. Firm X panelship for the year 2010 and 2020.

Matter	2010	2020	%
Number of panel	5	25	500
Panel application rejection	80%	10%	70

Financial performance

The objectives of ISO 9001:2015 in the firm are integrated with the business objectives. From the Management Review Minutes for 2020, each Head of Department presented their department collection for the audit period as opposed to the budget presented by them for the same period. There is a mixture of financial performance of Litigation and Conveyancing departments that are under the scope of ISO 9001 for Firm X. The results show that ISO 9001 implementation does not guarantee better financial performance of Firm X. Similarly, the study by Prashar (2020) stated that financial performance is determined by factors not related to QMS (*Table 5*).

Table 5. Firm X’s financial performance (2018, 2019 and 2020).

Department	Actual (2018)	Actual (2019)	Actual (2020)
Litigation	RM 259 328.00	RM 228 666.81	RM 414 741.52
Conveyancing	RM 284 926.20	RM 884 458.66	RM 373 286.51
Syariah	RM 66 606.81	RM 64 860.83	RM 63 617.92
Corporate	RM 44 900.00	RM 84 896.60	RM 87 044.38
Total	RM 655 761.01	RM 1 262 882.90	RM 987 053.69
Expenses	RM 646 850.00	RM 1 251 317.10	RM 971 878.20
Profit	RM 8 911.01	RM 11 565.89	RM 33 187.87

Conclusion

The motivation for ISO 9001 certification of Firm X are to 'improve work process', to have a systematic and organised workflow followed by the intention to improve productivity and quality of work in Firm X. Other motivation factors are to have an efficient operation, a faster delivery of work, to create and follow the standard template, staff empowerment, and to gain knowledge on ISO. On the other hand, the external motivation factors are for global recognition, to secure panelship, differentiating factor, to win client trust and for business benefits. The benefits of ISO 9001 implementation and maintenance obtained by firm X are both internal and external in nature. The internal benefits of ISO 9001 on Firm X such as it creates a systematic working process, standard procedure, standard documentation and quality delivery where ISO implementation procedures increase the firm's efficiency, decrease non-conformities, reduce the costs related to reworks and sustain the relationship with the customers. On the other hand, the external benefits derived from ISO 9001 implementation to the firm described by the respondents are in terms of differentiation (or being unique), recognition by clients, and business opportunities as shown by the increment in panelship on a yearly basis. The number of panelship increases to twenty-five panelship appointments and rejection rate reduces to 10% compared to 80% rejection rate in 2010. The increase in panelship in Firm X confirms that the ISO 9001:2015 certification is effective as a marketing tool due to client's perception of high service quality provided by the Firm. However, implementation does not have a direct impact on Firm X's financial performance.

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Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest with any parties involved with this study.

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