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# Overview of Studies on Ye Tianshi's Academic Thoughts in Differentiating and Treating Lung-System Diseases

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Abstract: Ye Tianshi was a renowned expert in classical formulas during the Qing Dynasty. He created the Light Bitterness and Mild Pungency Method, which is formulated based on the compatibility of "Xing (bitter almond), Kou (Fructus amomi rotundus), Ju (tangerine peel), and Jie (platycodon root)". This method regulates the dispersion and descent of lung Qi to dispel warm-heat pathogens and smooth the Qi movement of the triple energizer. In the treatment of lung system diseases, Ye classified them into two major categories based on etiology and pathogenesis: excess syndrome of nutrient-defense and deficiency syndrome of nutrient-defense. When discussing the treatment of cough caused by phlegm-fluid retention, he frequently referred to Synopsis of the Golden Chamber and attached great importance to summarizing and absorbing the academic thoughts of predecessors. As an accomplished expert in classical formulas, Ye Tianshi followed the academic essence of Xuanyuan and Qi Bo (founders of TCM theory) and respected the principles of Zhang Zhongjing's classical formulas, integrating these theories in a coherent manner. With his masterful application of classical formulas to achieve remarkable curative effects, Ye's academic viewpoints on treating lung system diseases still exert a profound influence on the modern clinical diagnosis and treatment of related diseases. Keywords: Linzheng Zhinan Yian (Guide to Clinical Practice with Medical Records); Wenre Lun (Treatise on Warm Heat Diseases); Ye Tianshi; Lung system diseases; Characteristics of academic thoughts

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#### 1. Introduction

Ye Tianshi, a distinguished physician of the Qing Dynasty, made significant contributions to the treatment of lung diseases through classical formulas. He developed the "Light Bitterness and Mild Pungency Method", rooted in the combination of bitter almond, amonum fruit, tangerine peel, and platycodon root, to regulate lung Qi and clear warm-heat pathogens. Classifying lung disorders into excess and deficiency syndromes of nutrient-defense, he integrated principles from ancient texts such as the Synopsis of the Golden Chamber and built upon the foundational theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Ye's scholarly insights and sophisticated application of

classical formulas continue to inform and guide modern clinical practice in respiratory conditions.

# 2. Academic characteristics of Ye Tianshi's treatment for lung system diseases

### 2.1. Gaining insights from clinical practice and establishing new theories

Ye Tianshi was not only a famous expert in classical formulas in the Qing Dynasty but also one of the representatives of the Warm Disease School and an outstanding TCM educator. He had trained numerous renowned physicians, such as Hua Xiuyun and Shao Xinfu. In Wenre Lun (Treatise on Warm Heat Diseases), Ye pointed out the onset feature of exogenous warm-heat pathogens: "Warm pathogens attack from above and first invade the lung". Therefore, cough is an extremely common symptom when warm-heat pathogens invade the lung. When discussing Ye Tianshi's relevant works, Yu Yang and Chen Wenhui mentioned that based on the above characteristics, Ye established the Light Bitterness and Mild Pungency Method, which uses the compatibility of "Xing, Kou, Ju, and Jie" as the basis for formulating prescriptions. This method regulates the dispersion and descent of lung Qi to dispel warm-heat pathogens and smooth the Qi movement of the triple energizer<sup>[1]</sup>.

Through their research on Ye Tianshi's methods for treating lung diseases in warm diseases, Fan Zhongxing, Zhou Jichun, et al. evaluated Ye's academic thoughts by stating that he "adopted various methods such as pungent dispersion to regulate lung-defense, purification and descent to adjust lung Qi, and simultaneous dispersion and descent for the treatment of exogenous pathogen invading the lung syndrome in warm diseases". They also quoted the view that "Ye Tianshi centered on the lung organ in treating asthma and differentiated and treated it based on the interconnections and transformations among meridians, zang-fu organs, Qi, blood, Yin, and Yang" to illustrate his academic viewpoints. They pointed out that for cases where damp-heat is concentrated in the upper energizer, the lung Qi should be diffused and unblocked. On one hand, this allows damp pathogens to be discharged from the exterior; on the other hand, it promotes damp pathogens to descend into the bladder and then be excreted through Qi transformation [2].

Ma et al. summarized the syndrome differentiation criteria, characteristics, prognosis of the primary nutrient-defense syndrome, as well as the syndrome differentiation and treatment criteria of complicated syndromes. They believed these summaries have practical clinical significance for the treatment of lung diseases. Wenre Lun contains many theories worthy of in-depth exploration, such as the specific application of the heat-penetrating and Yin-nourishing method in the treatment of nutrient-defense syndrome, which is manifested as the pungent dispersion for exogenous pathogens and sweet-cool moistening method [3]. They also commented that Ye Tianshi's discussions on the treatment of exogenous warm diseases are indeed concise and profound, embodying fundamental treatment principles in every sentence. Additionally, they briefly evaluated Linzheng Zhinan Yian (Guide to Clinical Practice with Medical Records) (hereinafter referred to as Guide), which is closely related to Ye Tianshi's clinical experience. Compiled and edited by Ye's disciples Hua Xiuyun and Shao Xinfu, Guide is a 10-volume work that records in detail all the medical cases of lung system diseases treated by Ye Tianshi during his lifetime, making it a comprehensive masterpiece of his academic achievements.

### 2.2. Compassionate dedication to benefiting the world and devoted excellence in medicine

Ye Tianshi was endowed with extraordinary intelligence and profound academic attainments in medicine. Well-versed in the medical theories of Xuanyuan and Qi (the pioneering figures of traditional Chinese medicine, TCM), he achieved a comprehensive mastery of TCM knowledge. His prescriptions were so effective that they could promptly cure severe and lingering diseases, earning him widespread fame across the regions south and

north of the Yangtze River. Hua Xiuyun, one of his disciples, highly praised Master Ye for his compassionate dedication to helping the world. He compiled Ye's medical experiences into a collection of works, which have served as a source of enlightenment for later generations of physicians. In diagnosing conditions and formulating prescriptions, Ye Tianshi never clung to rigid prejudices; his prescriptions were characterized by lightness, clarity, agility, and ingenuity. His medical practice embodied both the characteristics of Xin'an Medicine and the style of Wumen Medicine. Fan Zhongxing argued that Ye Tianshi carried forward the legacy of previous medical sages and paved the way for future scholars, further improving the theory of exogenous warm diseases (a category of TCM diseases caused by external warm pathogenic factors). Based on Ye's "Eleven Methods for Treating Wind-Warm Syndrome" and other medical insights, some researchers have summarized 63 groups of commonly used medicinal combinations, as well as the compatibility rules for treating exogenous warm diseases. All these applications adhere to the TCM theories of Defensive-Qi-Nutrient-Blood (a framework for differentiating warm diseases), Tri-Jiao (a system dividing the body into upper, middle, and lower jiao for diagnosis and treatment) and Zang-Fu Organs (internal organs) for syndrome differentiation and treatment.

Zhu Hongmei, Tan Ting, Guo Qi, and other scholars pointed out that Ye Tianshi's treatment of lung system diseases (diseases involving the lung and its related meridians) could be categorized into two major types based on etiology and pathogenesis: excessive syndrome of nutrient and defense Qi (a condition where pathogenic factors accumulate in the nutrient and defense layers of the body) and deficient syndrome of nutrient and defense Qi (a condition where the nutrient and defense Qi are insufficient). In contrast, Wang Xiaole and his colleagues summarized the characteristics of Ye Tianshi's treatment methods for lung system diseases as follows: adhering to the pathogenesis of the disease, taking the lung as the core pivot, and flexibly applying three methods, dispersing (promoting the dispersion of lung Qi), clearing (clearing heat in the lung), and nourishing (nourishing the lung), according to the timing of the disease; differentiating between deficiency and excess in treating asthma syndrome, with "excess in the lung and deficiency in the kidney" as the key guiding principle; integrating the Tri-Jiao theory to relieve abdominal distension (a symptom of fluid retention) through resolving accumulation and dredging (a method to eliminate stagnation), and ensuring the smooth flow of the water passage to expel pathogenic factors [4].

Ye Tianshi's medical skills were superb, capable of "restoring health with wonderful hands" (a TCM praise for curing difficult diseases). Many intractable or even deemed "incurable" diseases were successfully cured through his accurate syndrome differentiation. Having engaged in clinical practice for 70 years, Ye Tianshi dedicated himself to helping the world with compassion and made strenuous efforts to cure severe and chronic diseases, all of which were attributed to his precise syndrome differentiation.

### 2.3. Absorbing diverse methods and integrating ancient and contemporary insights

One of the important academic characteristics of Master Ye was his emphasis on summarizing and absorbing the academic thoughts of previous physicians in clinical practice. When differentiating and treating cough, he often referred to Zhang Zhongjing's (a renowned Han Dynasty physician) ideas: adapting to the functional characteristics of lung Qi (which governs dispersion and descent), promoting both dispersion and descent of lung Qi; cultivating earth to generate metal (a TCM theory where "earth" refers to the spleen and "metal" refers to the lung, meaning nourishing the spleen to support lung function), and protecting the stomach Qi (the fundamental Qi for digestion and nutrient absorption).

When discussing the damp-heat syndrome in the lung meridian (a condition where damp and heat pathogens accumulate in the lung meridian), Ye Tianshi frequently drew on the diagnostic and therapeutic thoughts from Li Dongyuan's Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach, specifically the idea that "when primordial Qi (the fundamental

Qi of life) loses its proper residence, heat scorches the body." Guo Yongsheng, Huang Shuting, Zhang Zhen, and others proposed that Ye Tianshi's discussion on damage to primordial Qi mainly focused on the syndrome of "dual deficiency of Qi and Yin" (insufficiency of both Qi and Yin, two essential substances for life activities), especially in cases of "dual impairment of Yin and Yang" and "dual deficiency of nutrient and defense Qi." The corresponding treatment principles he advocated included: protecting Yin fluid (a substance that moistens and nourishes the body), relieving heat with sweet-warm herbs (a TCM method using sweet and warm-natured herbs to eliminate heat caused by Qi deficiency); regulating Yin and Yang, and replenishing nutrient and defense Qi. Ye Tianshi's methods of nourishing Yin (replenishing Yin fluid) for treating lung system diseases mostly followed the approaches mentioned in Zhang Zhongjing's Synopsis of the Golden Chamber, such as the "method of nourishing Yin and clearing dryness," "method of nourishing Yin and replenishing Qi," and "method of nourishing Yin and activating blood circulation", all of which achieved remarkable clinical effects [5].

When expounding on the treatment of cough caused by phlegm-rheum (a TCM concept referring to pathological fluid retention in the body), Ye Tianshi often consulted Synopsis of the Golden Chamber. In this classic work, "phlegm-rheum" is used in a broad sense, while "four types of rheum" (a specific classification) are used in a narrow sense. The broad-sense phlegm-rheum is mainly classified based on the location of the retained pathogenic fluid: Rheum retained in the stomach and intestines (narrow-sense phlegm-rheum), Rheum hanging under the costal region (suspended rheum), Rheum overflowing into the limbs and body surface (overflowing rheum), Rheum branching in the chest and diaphragm (branching rheum). This classification reminds us that when treating asthma and cough caused by the four types of rheum, we must carefully differentiate between "phlegm" and "rheum" (two distinct pathological substances) and treat them separately. For the treatment of phlegm-rheum diseases, Ye Tianshi put forward innovative methods: "Opening Tai Yang and closing Yangming" (a method based on the Six Meridians theory, where "opening TaiYang" refers to dispelling pathogens from the TaiYang meridian, and "closing Yangming" refers to regulating the Yangming meridian to prevent pathogen invasion); Treating external rheum from the spleen (since the spleen is responsible for transporting fluid, external rheum is often linked to spleen deficiency) and internal rheum from the kidney (since the kidney governs water metabolism, internal rheum is associated with kidney deficiency); "Opening-closing-dredging method for rheum", all of which yielded significant therapeutic effects. The theory of "opening-closing-pivot" (a core TCM theory describing the functional characteristics of meridians) originated from Huangdi Neijing (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor, the foundational classic of TCM), which distinguishes between "opening-closing of the Three Yang Meridians" and "opening-closing of the Three Yin Meridians": For the Three Yang Meridians: TaiYang is the "opening," Yangming is the "closing," and Shao Yang is the "pivot" (the core for regulating Qi flow); For the Three Yin Meridians: TaiYin is the "opening," JueYin is the "closing," and ShaoYin is the "pivot."

Dai Qianxiang, Wu Xiaoping, Liu Hui, and other researchers summarized Ye Tianshi's theory of "medicinal Qi and flavor" (a TCM theory that classifies herbs by their properties, such as Qi ascending/descending/floating/sinking and flavor sour/bitter/sweet/pungent/salty) for commonly used prescriptions. This theory mainly relies on the Tri-Jiao syndrome differentiation method, combined with the Defensive-Qi-Nutrient-Blood method, to differentiate and treat exogenous febrile diseases <sup>[6]</sup>. If pathogenic factors exist in the Defensive level of the Upper Jiao, pungent and dispersing herbs should be used in mild doses. If pathogens are in the Qi level, bitter and cold herbs are applied to clear heat. If pathogens invade the Nutrient and Blood levels, salty and cold herbs are used as adjuvants. For Yin deficiency, sweet and cold herbs are employed; For pathogenic factors in the Middle Jiao, bitter-pungent and cool-cold herbs are used. For accumulated dampness, warm and unblocking herbs are mostly used. When the disease affects the Lower Jiao, clearing-nourishing, salty-bitter herbs are used; sweet-salty herbs are

required for treating Yin deficiency. Ye Tianshi also adopted the "method of combining dryness and moistening" (using herbs with dry and moist properties in combination) to strengthen healthy Qi and dispel pathogenic factors.

Wu Fan, Dong Changwu, Wang Xiaole, and others pointed out that Ye Tianshi applied: The "pungent-warm diaphoresis method" (using pungent and warm herbs to induce sweating) to treat wind-cold exterior syndrome. The "pungent-warm collaterals-dredging method" to treat wind invading the lung collaterals (the tiny branches of lung meridians). The "pungent-warm Yang-unblocking method" to expel turbidity (pathogenic substances). By reviewing relevant literature, they found that Ye Tianshi believed the etiology and pathogenesis of lung impediment (a TCM disease characterized by impaired lung function, similar to some chronic lung diseases) lay in pathogenic heat in the Upper Jiao stagnating and blocking lung Qi, which disrupts the ascending and descending functions of lung Qi. If this condition persists, it develops into lung impediment [7]. Wang Caidi, Li Beibei, Gong Li, and other scholars discovered through research that TCM treatment is highly effective for pulmonary fibrosis classified as lung impediment in TCM. For severe cases of lung impediment, Ye Tianshi often used "contemporary prescriptions" (prescriptions created after the Han Dynasty, as opposed to ancient classic prescriptions) such as Qianjin Weijing Decoction (a prescription originally from Qianjin Yaofang, "Essential Prescriptions for Emergencies") [8]. Ye Tianshi's application of Qianjin Weijing Decoction in treating lung impediment demonstrated the decoction's effects of promoting Qi circulation, activating blood flow, and clearing lung heat, thereby expanding its clinical application scope. Additionally, through the study of Guides (likely referring to TCM clinical practice guides), the author found that other contemporary prescriptions commonly used by Ye Tianshi for treating lung impediment included Weixi Pill, Sangxing Decoction, and Jiegeng Xingren Decoction.

Zhao Pengfei and Pu Mingzhi pointed out Ye Tianshi's observations on tongue manifestations (an important part of TCM diagnosis) as well as his treatment methods, formulas, and herbs for warm pathogens invading the lung-defense level of the Upper Jiao. Ye Tianshi also revealed the pathogenic characteristics of exogenous warm diseases, which shows that he frequently combined the Tri-Jiao syndrome differentiation theory with the Defensive-Qi-Nutrient-Blood theory in disease differentiation and treatment <sup>[9]</sup>.

While absorbing and drawing on the academic thoughts of previous physicians, Ye Tianshi also independently developed the theory of medicinal Qi and flavor for commonly used prescriptions in treating lung system diseases. In this way, he pushed forward the inheritance and development of TCM by bringing forth new ideas while preserving the essential traditions.

# 3. Analysis of Ye Tianshi's academic thoughts on treating pulmonary diseases with classical prescriptions

# 3.1. Examining clinical syndromes and administering prescriptions flexibly

Li Niuniu, Wu Xiaohong, Shi Liqing, and other researchers pointed out that there is a total of 178 medical cases treated with the "mild bitter and slightly pungent" method recorded in Zhinan (the Guide), involving 35 types of diseases and syndromes, among which cough is the most common one. A total of 102 kinds of medicines were counted, and apricot kernel was used with the highest frequency [10]. According to statistics by some researchers, among 593 medical cases of pulmonary diseases treated by Ye Tianshi, apricot kernel was used the most frequently, up to 265 times, ranking first among all medicines. For example, in a medical case of an "Erba" (28-year-old, or a case numbered 28) patient in the "Cough" section of Volume 2 of the Guide, the patient suffered from cough and facial edema, which was caused by wind pathogen blocking the lung defense system, requiring treatment with pungent medicines to dispel the pathogen. Ye Tianshi administered the original Maxing Ganshi Decoction (Ephedra,

Apricot Kernel, Gypsum, and Licorice Decoction) that dispels heat with pungent and cool properties, which fully demonstrates his adherence to Zhang Zhongjing's rules for using prescriptions. Through animal experiments, Wei Dongliang found that different monarch-minister-adjuvant-courier compatibility combinations of Maxing Ganshi Decoction all have a certain intervention effect on asthmatic SD rats. However, on the whole, the therapeutic effect of the original prescription in treating asthma is more significant than that of other decomposed prescriptions [11].

Another example is the case of Patient Wang in the "Asthma" section of Volume 4 of the Guide. The patient had disharmony of lung Qi, asthma triggered by cold exposure, and phlegm obstruction in the upper jiao (upper energizer), which made it impossible for the patient to lie on a pillow. Therefore, Ye Tianshi prepared a modified version of Xiaoqinglong Decoction (Minor Blue Dragon Decoction), and the entire prescription mainly focused on warming and resolving cold phlegm in the lung and stomach. Some scholars have pointed out that the post-prescription modifications, such as "removing ephedra in cases of diarrhea, dysphagia, dysuria with lower abdominal fullness, or asthma," are considered to be "suspected of not conforming to Zhang Zhongjing's original intention" and thus deserve attention. From the perspective of treating asthma with the theory of phlegm-fluid retention, Lü Mingsheng, Cui Hongsheng, Ren Peizhong, and others summarized Ye Tianshi's treatment characteristics, including activating the TaiYang meridian to unblock the meridians and fu organs (hollow organs), emphasizing the influence of the lung, spleen, and kidney, distinguishing the primary and secondary conditions clearly, and attaching importance to the changes of Yin and Yang in the four seasons and day and night in medication. Pulmonary diseases such as cold, cough, and asthma exhibit obvious temporal regularity [12].

In addition, take the case of Patient Zha "Ersi" (24-year-old, or a case numbered 24) in the "Lung Atrophy" section of Volume 2 of the Guide: the patient suffered from deficiency-heat lung atrophy syndrome, and Ye Tianshi treated it with Zhang Zhongjing's original Maimendong Decoction (Ophiopogon Decoction) method. When studying the Guide, Wei Jiangyan and Ai Jun found that under the guidance of the principle of "descending adverse Qi and regulating Qi downward," Ye Tianshi used Maimendong Decoction to nourish the Yin of the lung and stomach, and flexibly modified it to treat various pulmonary diseases such as cough and lung atrophy [13]. A scholar sorted out 42 etiological and pathogenetic conditions for the use of *Pinellia* in the Guide; through analyzing the relevant medical cases in the Guide, the scholar summarized the uses of *Radix ophiopogonis* (maidong) as follows: nourishing the Yin of the lung and stomach to treat lung-stomach Yin deficiency syndrome; replenishing body fluids with its sweet and cold properties to treat Yin injury syndrome caused by fire transformation from internal emotional impairment and Yin injury syndrome in the late stage of warm diseases; and moistening dryness and nourishing Yin to treat atrophy-flaccidity syndrome due to insufficient lung Yin.

Furthermore, the case of Patient Cao "Erer" (22-year-old, or a case numbered 22) in the "Lung Obstruction" section of Volume 4 of the Guide was diagnosed as lung obstruction caused by pathogenic heat congesting the lung and reversed upward flow of lung Qi. Ye Tianshi treated it with a modified Shegan Mahuang Decoction (Belamcanda and Ephedra Decoction) to diffuse lung Qi, dispel pathogens, descend Qi, and resolve phlegm.

In terms of prescription administration and medication, Ye Tianshi learned from the ancients but was not constrained by them. He made bold innovations in the application of classical prescriptions and used contemporary prescriptions (prescriptions developed after the Han Dynasty) more exquisitely. The classical prescriptions he commonly used for treating pulmonary diseases include Maxing Ganshi Decoction, Xiaoqinglong Decoction, and Maimendong Decoction; while the commonly used contemporary prescriptions include Sangxing Decoction (Mulberry Leaf and Apricot Kernel Decoction), Waitai Fuling Yin (Fuling Drink from Waitai Miyao), and Qianjin Weijing Decoction (Reed Rhizome Decoction from Qianjin Yaofang). His medical works contain profound theories, which have exerted a subtle influence on the inheritance of TCM academic thoughts and clinical

diagnosis and treatment of diseases in later generations.

### 3.2. Emphasizing curative effect and mastering the regular to adapt to the variable

In clinical practice, Ye Tianshi always focused on practical curative effects and often used Zhang Zhongjing's classical prescriptions with slight modifications, such as in the treatment of cough. An ShiYing, Ma Mengjiao, Dong Yidan, and others believed that Ye Tianshi (honored as "Ye Shengzong") took pathogen elimination as the key principle and emphasized the protection and preservation of Yin fluid in treating exogenous cough; he particularly attached importance to the correlations between the lung and spleen, lung and kidney, and lung and liver in treating internal injury cough [14]. Ye Tianshi adapted Maxing Ganshi Decoction to release the exterior and clear heat for treating cough caused by cold pathogen wrapping heat. Through research, Lü Mingsheng and others found that for treating pulmonary diseases whose main etiology and pathogenesis is "cold wrapping heat," it is necessary to adopt therapeutic methods such as "resolving fire stagnation by dispersion" and "dispelling pathogens through division and dispersion" to balance cold and heat, expel pathogens, and achieve the state of "Yin-Yang balance" (Yin and Yang in a harmonious and stable state).

When studYing Ye Tianshi's medical cases of cough, Wang Jiamei, Cui Hongsheng, Gong Xuefeng, and others discovered his medication rules for treating cough: For descending Qi, relieving cough, and resolving phlegm, apricot kernel is often used; For nourishing Yin and moistening dryness, *Radix adenophorae* (shashen) and *Radix ophiopogonis* (maidong) are commonly used; For cough caused by water-damp retention, diuretic and dampness-resolving medicines such as coix seed (yiren) and poria (fuling) are frequently administered; For regulating Qi and resolving phlegm, platycodon root (jiegeng) is mostly used; For treating lung diseases by regulating the middle jiao (middle energizer), modified prescriptions of the Xiaojianzhong Decoction (Minor Construct the Middle Decoction) series are applied; For nourishing Yin and tonifying the kidney, absorbing Qi, and relieving cough, medicines such as *Rehmannia glutinosa* (shudihuang) and *Angelica sinensis* (danggui) are often used [15]. In addition, for treating cough in children with warm diseases, Ye Tianshi, considering the physical characteristics of children (who are in a state of "pure Yang" with vigorous vitality but insufficient Yin fluid and immature viscera), mostly adopted methods such as nourishing Yin and clearing heat, and dispelling pathogens while supporting healthy Qi in the diagnosis and treatment of pediatric pulmonary diseases.

# 4. Conclusion

Ye Tianshi was an accomplished master in the application of classical prescriptions. He followed the academic thoughts of Xuanyuan and Qibo (founders of TCM theory) and respected the essence of Zhang Zhongjing's classical prescriptions, integrating these theories comprehensively. His prescription administration and medication could often cure stubborn and chronic diseases, and the prescriptions he left behind were widely praised. With great compassion for saving the world, he categorized and compiled his medical cases in detail, which are sufficient to enlighten later generations and enable those who are eager to learn and think deeply to achieve cross-inference by analogy. Ye Tianshi's superb application of classical prescriptions to bring patients back to life, as well as his academic views on treating pulmonary diseases, still have a profound impact on the modern clinical diagnosis and treatment of related diseases.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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