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## REVIEW ARTICLE

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Ascertaining *Ahimara* (a medicinal plant) of *Ashtanga Nighantu*: An exploratory study

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Abstract

*Ashtanga Nighantu* contains synonymous explanations of 257 drugs that are cited in *Vagbhata Samhita*. It also contains *Viprakirṇagana* that incorporates 133 plants. The botanical identification of many of them seems to be doubtful and unconfirmed due to misconceptions, mixing and exchange of synonyms with other species, and changes in nomenclature in subsequent lexicons like *Dhanvantari Nighantu* and others, which further put down a plethora of controversies. As a result, botanical sources of these plants are to be identified. The *Ahimara* is one of these lesser-known plants. This review aims to botanically identify the plant *Ahimara*. The lexicon of *Ashtanga Nighantu* edited by Acharya Priyavrata Sharma was taken as the main source of analysis. Other texts considered were *Ashtanga Nighantu* by K. S. Viswanathana, Sanskrit to Hindi translation dictionaries, *Vedon mai Ayurveda*, *Brihatrayi*, *Laghutrayi*; 27 lexicons, medicinal databases, and indexed journals accessed through Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus. The evidences obtained in these are support as evidence for determining *Ahimara* (*Haldina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale). This plant is as mentioned an antidote to snake poison and

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having yellow wood, as mentioned in *Ashtanga Nighantu*. Identity of this plant became a subject of controversy since the name *Aribheda* is also the synonym of *Arimeda*. Another synonym suggested by the author was *Haridruna*, which may later become *Haridru/Haldina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale. However, it may be deemed as *Ahimara* rather than *Irimesa*, based on supporting literature. Although the plant *Haridru* possesses yellow wood, as indicated in the synonyms mentioned in the lexicon, but no supporting evidence is found for its therapeutic use in snake bite. The present review suggests that there is further need of comprehensive phytochemical and clinical studies to affirm this botanical identity.

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**Keywords:** *Ahimara*, *Ashtanga Nighantu*, controversies, *Haldina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale, *Haridru*, *Irimesa*

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#### Introduction

*Ashtanga Nighantu* is one of the most important Ayurvedic lexicon. This lexicon is an extension of the knowledge of *Ashtanga Hrudaya* and *Ashtanga Samgraha*.<sup>[1]</sup>

This vocabulary is divided into 27 chapters, each of which has a synonym explanation for each medicine stated as a part of *Ganas* in *Ashtanga Samgraha*'s chapter *Vividhagana Samgraha*. Similar to the basic classics, the chapters are called after the first substance in the group.<sup>[2]</sup> The author's own work is shown in the last chapter, *Viprakirnanagana*, which contains synonyms for 381 items, including 133 medicinal plants, 10 flowers, 11 fruits, 22 *Shakas* (vegetables), 9 import-export drugs, 6 salts, 7 animal products, 25 minerals, 12 poisons, 5 water drugs, 4 liquids, 7 milk products, 4 sugar products, 2 types of honey, 5 types of alcohol, 19 crops, 5 groups of drugs, 48 animals, 8 *Dhatu*s, 3 *Doshas*, 4 *Bhoovarga* (soils), 2 domestic items, 12 natural items, 10 plant parts, and 4 Gods and Goddesses, 4 miscellaneous things, viz., *Aushadha* (medicines), *Vaidya* (doctors), *Dhanvantari* (God of Ayurveda), and *Ashwinadwaya* (doctors of Gods) of that era are all explained.<sup>[3]</sup> As a basis for identification, these synonyms refer to the distinctive characteristics, applications, and properties of these items.

*Acharya Priyavraja Sharma* edited *Ashtanga Nighantu* from three manuscripts, referencing *Dhanvantari Nighantu* and *Amarkosha* and removing, adding, and interpreting terms from manuscripts.<sup>[4]</sup> This book is available in Sanskrit. It has an English and Tamil translation in a subsequent version; however, the last chapter is still untranslated.<sup>[1]</sup> Further misconceptions, mixing and exchanging of synonyms with other species, and changes in nomenclature in subsequent lexicons put down a plethora of controversies. These might be the reasons behind the botanical misidentification or unidentification of several plants such as *Ajakshi*,<sup>[5]</sup> *Godhapadi*,<sup>[6]</sup> *Indravalli*,<sup>[6]</sup> *Navneeta*,<sup>[7]</sup> *Badriparni*,<sup>[8]</sup> *Ahimara*, etc. Therefore, these plants are yet to be identified botanically.

The morphological information in classical literatures is sketchy and wholly inadequate for establishing botanical identity, and the gap in morphological detailing is due to the "experiential" pedagogy of India's health tradition. While theoretical notions and advanced reasoning connected to pharmacology were included in plant knowledge transmission, it also assumed an oral, practical, and experienced way of learning about plant identity through field labor.<sup>[8]</sup> In order to generate identifying criteria among many plant sources, apart from collecting relevant data from field studies, pharmaceuticals must be addressed from a variety of perspectives including literary, pharmacognostical, pharmacological as well as clinical.<sup>[9]</sup> For the safe and efficacious usage and standardization of Ayurvedic medicines, before the laboratory standardization of crude drugs as well as formulations, the correct identity of the plants should be established.<sup>[10]</sup>

One of these contentious identities is the plant *Ahimara*, which appears in *Viprakirnanagana*, verse 230 of *Ashtanga Nighantu*.<sup>[11]</sup> Later lexicons used *Ahimara*'s synonyms for other plants, causing confusion. As a result, the plant's botanical identity remained unrevealed. There have also been no researches done on this plant. This review aimed to find out the probable botanical identity of the plant *Ahimara* mentioned in *Ashtanga Nighantu* and fill in the gaps between botanical identification and Ayurvedic nomenclature.

#### Materials and Methods

The main source for critical review was *Ashtanga Nighantu*, edited by *Acharya Priyavrata Sharma*. Three manuscripts were used as the editing source material; manuscripts 1 and 2 are from the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library's descriptive list of manuscripts, Vol XXIII Medicine. The first has a Telugu meaning, whereas the second has a Tamil meaning. The Description Catalog of Sanskrit Manuscripts, Tanjore-vol XVII, lists Manuscript 3 as No. 11297.<sup>[12]</sup> The Kuppuswamy Sastri Research Institute of Madras (Chennai) published this edited version in 1973 as a form of book. It is a rough collection of all *shlokas* (verses) in Sanskrit language.<sup>[13]</sup> Later, in 2004, with the help of Dr. K.S. Viswanathana Sarana, an English and Tamil translation of the first 26 chapters was published as a book by the same publisher, although the last chapter (*Viprakirnanagana*) was left untranslated.<sup>[1]</sup> The verses were translated from Sanskrit to Hindi and English using a variety of existing published dictionaries.<sup>[14]</sup><sup>[15]</sup> On the basis of etymology and word development, names were interpreted. The words were matched and compared with other relevant publications such as *Vedon mai Ayurveda* (the book has mentioned the presence of Ayurveda in Vedas), *Brihatrayi*, *Laghutrayi*, and 15 e-*Nighantus* by the National Institute of Indian Medical Heritage, CCRAS, New Delhi, India, viz., *Saushruta Nighantu*, *Paryayaratnamala*, *Abhidhanaratnamala*, *Hridayadipika Nighantu*, *Shabdacandrika*, *Abhidhanaratnamanjari*, *Camatkara Nighantu*, *Nighantushesha*, *Saraswati Nighantu*, *Rajavallabha Nighantu*, *Laghu Nighantu*, *Shivakosha*, *Sidhamantra*, *Sidhasara Nighantu*, *Madanadi Nighantu* and 12 published *Nighantus* as a book, viz., *Dhanvantari Nighantu*, *Sodhala Nighantu*, *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, *Dravyagunasangraha*, *Raja Nighantu*, *Madanapala Nighantu*, *Bhavaprakasha Nighantu*, *Nighantu Adarsha*, *Shaligrama Nighantu*, *Madhava Dravyaguna*, *Priya Nighantu*, *Mahaushadha Nighantu*. Authentic medicinal plant databases such as Database on Medicinal Plants Used in Ayurveda, Indian Medicinal Plant Database, some lesser known herbal drugs of Ayurveda, The Ayurvedic Pharmacopoeia of India, Pharmacognosy of Indigenous Drugs, indexed journals accessed through Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science (search till November 2020) were used to find out up-to-date information.

#### Observations

Analysis of *Ahimara*: The literary definition of *Ahi* is "which can kill," and a drug called *Ahiganaya* (which is *Ahi*'s antidote) is mentioned in *Atharva veda*; it also goes by the name *Paidava*. Its root is used as a snake venom antidote. Its habitat is described as being near mountains, and it belongs to the *Kairata* family. It was dug out with powerful and stout instruments, indicating a plant with a deep root system in the soil.<sup>[16]</sup> However this plant is not mentioned in *Caraka Samhita*,<sup>[17]</sup> *Sushruta Samhita*,<sup>[18]</sup> *Ashtanga Hrudaya*,<sup>[12]</sup> *Ashtanga Samgraha*,<sup>[20]</sup> *Bhavaprakasha Samhita*,<sup>[21]</sup> and *Sharangadhara Samhita*.<sup>[22]</sup>



Controversies regarding *Ankola* (*Alangium salvifolium* L.f. Wangerin)

Controversies regarding *Daruharidra* (*Berberis aristata* DC.)

Other plants mentioned in Ayurveda with yellow wood are as follows.

## Results

*Ahimara*, *Aribhedasu*, *Peetadarur*, and *Haridruma*<sup>[11]</sup>

*Ahimara*, *Aribheda*, *Peetadaru*, and *Haridruma* are basonyms and synonyms mentioned. These were used as research keywords.

### Etymological derivation of synonyms

- *Ahimara*: The word *Ahi* means serpent,<sup>[72]</sup> or which kills us and *Mara* means to kill,<sup>[73]</sup> so the word *Ahimara* can be interpreted as which kills serpent or detoxifies serpent poison.
- *Aribheda*: The word *Ari* means enemy,<sup>[74]</sup> this can be considered as a serpent or its poison as it is enemy of humans, *Bheda* means to break or pierce,<sup>[75]</sup> so *Aribheda* can be interpreted as one that kills serpent or can interrupt the flow of poison.
- *Peetadaru*: The word *Peeta* denotes yellow color<sup>[44]</sup> and *Daru* means a piece of wood.<sup>[76]</sup> Its wood is yellow-colored.
- *Haridruma*: The word *Hari* means yellow or green<sup>[77]</sup> and *Druma* means a tree or plant.<sup>[78]</sup> It is yellow-colored plant.

### Interpretation of synonyms

Decoding the synonyms described in *Ashtanga Nighantu* indicates that *Ahimara* is a yellow-colored tree, bush, or liana; the plant is said to be an antidote to snake poison or perhaps to kill serpents.

This plant is listed as a synonym of *Irimeda/Acacia farnesiana* (L.) Wight and Arn in many lexicons [Table 1]. In contrast to the yellow wood indicated in *Ashtanga Nighantu*, *Irimeda* has a dark colored wood character [Figure 1]. *Haridru* is another plant that resembles the synonym *Haridruma*. This plant has a yellow woody stem [Table 5] and [Figure 4]. Sadhana *et al.*<sup>[79]</sup> have mentioned the use of its buds as an antidote to snake poison. *Haridru/Haldina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale/Syn. *Adina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale can therefore be identified as *Ahimara* based on the deciphering of synonyms and chronology.

Table 1: Synonyms of Ahimara mentioned in various texts

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Figure 1: Black-colored stem of *Irimeda/Acacia farnesiana* (L.) Wight and Arn

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## Discussion

### *Irimeda* and *Ahimara*

The word *Ahimara* is synonymous to the plant *Ahiganya* (antidote to snake poison), whose roots are mentioned in *Atharva Veda* as a snake venom antidote [Table 1].

Later, lexicons to *Ashtanga Nighantu* such as *Dhanvantari Nighantu*, *Sodhala Nighantu*, *Hridayadipaka Nighantu*, and *Raja Nighantu* have cited *Ahimara* or *Ahimaraka* as a synonym for *Irimeda*. Again in these lexicons, *Putimeda* (bad smell from wood) and *Godhaskandha* (black stem like Iguana) are synonyms of *Irimeda* [Figure 1], whereas *Ashtanga Nighantu* has mentioned *Peetadaru* and *Haridruma* as synonyms of *Ahimara*, which indicates yellow wood feature [Figure 4] and [Table 1].

*Raja Nighantu* mentioned *Irimeda* as a separate plant from *Vitakhadira*, whereas *Madanapala Nighantu*, *Bhavaprakasha Nighantu*, *Shabdacandrika*, *Shaligrama Nighantu*, and *Prayayaratnamala* have mentioned both as same plant and have given synonyms like *Kalaskandha* and *Godhaskandha* denoting black-colored stem which is not resembling yellow wood character of *Ahimara* [Table 1].

Although *Ashtanga Nighantu* has assigned the synonym *Aribheda* for *Ahimara*, subsequent lexicons such as *Dhanvantari Nighantu*, *Sodhala Nighantu*, *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, *Hridayadipaka Nighantu*, and *Raja Nighantu* changed the nomenclature from *Aribheda* to *Arimeda* [Table 1].

*Ahimara* is not mentioned in *Samhitas*, not even in these lexicons, viz., *Abhidhanaratnamanjari*, *Camatkara Nighantu*, *Dravyagunasangraha*, *Nighantushesha*, *Saraswati Nighantu*, *Madhava Dravyaguna*, *Rajavallabha Nighantu*, *Laghu Nighantu*, *Shivakosha Sidhamantra*, *Sidhasara Nighantu*, *Madanadi Nighantu*, *Priya Nighantu*, *Mahaushadha Nighantu* and even not mentioned in these databases, viz., some lesser known herbal drugs of Ayurveda, Indian Medicinal Plant Database, and Pharmacognosy of Indigenous Drugs [Table 1]. This predicament could be owing to the plant's unknown identity. The database on medicinal plants used in Ayurveda [Table 1] recognized *Acacia leucophloea* Willd. as *Arimeda*. *Ahimara*, *Ahimeda*, *Kalaskandha*, *Arimedaka* are mentioned as its synonyms; however, macroscopic studies of its bark and stem, which are gray to white on the outside and brown to reddish brown on the inside when dried, do not match the synonym *Kalaskandha* (black stem) [Table 1].



Arimeda is included in the Ayurvedic Pharmacopoeia of India as a synonym for Irimeda and Vitakhadira. It has a nearly black outer bark and a reddish brown inner bark [Table 1] and [Figure 1]. This review supports the Irimeda's Kalaskandha (black stem) synonym, demonstrating that Irimeda is a distinct plant from Ahimara.

The use of synonyms has sparked controversy in this area. Arimeda or Irimeda is not the same as Ahimara. Controversy arose as a result of the synonym Aribheda; however, the two words are not synonymous in the literal sense. Furthermore, there is no proof that Irimeda is utilized as a snake poison antidote, rather it is used as a poison pacifier. The characters of Arimeda and Ahimara mentioned in Ashtanga Nighantu bear no relation.

Ankola-Peetasara is a synonym for Ankola, signifying the plant's yellow wood feature [Figure 2]; it is also listed as an antidote for snake poison, thus displaying resemblance to Ahimara's characteristics. However, Ankola is mentioned independently in the same chapter of this lexicon, and it is also distinguished by yellow wood [Table 2].



Figure 2: Grayish yellow stem of Ankola (*A. salvifolium* L. f. Wangerin)

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| References from other lexicons  | References from Ashtanga Nighantu   |
|---|---|
| Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) and Charaka Samhita (Sushruta Samhita) mention Ankola as a synonym for Ahimara. It is also mentioned in the Ashtanga Nighantu (Kashyapa Samhita) as a synonym for Ahimara. | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) mentions Ankola as a synonym for Ahimara. It is also mentioned in the Ashtanga Nighantu (Kashyapa Samhita) as a synonym for Ahimara. |

Table 2: Controversies regarding Ankola (*A. salvifolium* L.f. Wangerin)

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Daruharidra: This plant has a similarity in names, a yellow wood character [Figure 3], and the ability to operate as a poison antidote. However, it is also referenced in Ashtanga Nighantu (*Haridradigana*) with different synonyms that do not suggest similar features [Table 3].



Figure 3: Yellow stem of Daruharidra (*B. aristata* DC.)

[Click here to view](#)

| References from other lexicons   | References from Ashtanga Nighantu  |
|--|--|
| Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) mentions Daruharidra as a synonym for Ahimara. It is also mentioned in the Ashtanga Nighantu (Kashyapa Samhita) as a synonym for Ahimara. | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) mentions Daruharidra as a synonym for Ahimara. It is also mentioned in the Ashtanga Nighantu (Kashyapa Samhita) as a synonym for Ahimara. |

Table 3: Controversies regarding Daruharidra (*B. aristata* DC.)

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Other plants with yellow wood include Vijayasara, Peetacandana, Kinkirata, Sarala, Nimba, and Tuni [Table 4], but none of these is indicated as antidotes for snake poison.

| Sl. No. | Other plant  | Reference                            |
|---------|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1       | Vijayasara   | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) |
| 2       | Peetacandana | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) |
| 3       | Kinkirata    | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) |
| 4       | Sarala       | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) |
| 5       | Nimba        | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) |
| 6       | Tuni         | Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) |

Table 4: Other plants mentioned in Ayurved with yellow wood

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### Haridru as Ahimara

Evidences for yellow wood feature of Haridru that matches Ahimara's synonyms Haridruma (yellow tree) and Peetadaru (yellow wood)

In Vedas, Haridru is indicated to remove away from cemetery. Its yellow wood feature is not mentioned here [Table 5].

| Reference                            | Text   |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Ashtanga Nighantu (Sushruta Samhita) | Haridru is mentioned as a synonym for Ahimara. |
| Ashtanga Nighantu (Kashyapa Samhita) | Haridru is mentioned as a synonym for Ahimara. |

Table 5: Haridru as per different Ayurvedic texts

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It is described by Dhavantari Nighantu and Shaligrama Nighantu as having a yellow-colored root comparable to turmeric [Table 5]. Haridra is mentioned in Madanapala Nighantu, and its synonyms in Kaiyadeva Nighantu indicates it as a lovely golden plant. This plant has gorgeous blossoms that resemble Kadamba and has yellow wood [Figure 4], as per Raja Nighantu. Ashtanga Nighantu mentioned Haridruma as a synonym, which may be transformed to Haridru in later Nighantus, created the controversy. Because some of synonyms of Ahimara have been interchangeably used with Irimeda and others with Haridru, Ahimara has remained unnamed. Because of the synonym Haridruma and the similarity of characters, Haridra or Haridru can be considered as Ahimara.

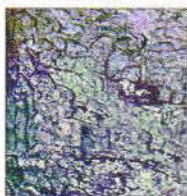


Figure 4: Stem of *H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale

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*H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale/Syn. *Adina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Hook. f. is called as yellow teak. A yellow coloring matter, adinin, belonging to the naphthaquinone group of pigments, is present in its heartwood.<sup>[80]</sup>

**Evidence of Haridru's antidote or snake-killing properties, which correspond to Ahimara's synonyms (Ahimara, Aribheda)**

In most *Nighantus*, *Haridru* is mentioned in *Vishavarga* (a category of toxic substances). It is described as a dangerous drug, and poisons have an antidote; *Shavaravisha* (plant poison) can neutralise *Janganavisha* (animal poisons).<sup>[81]</sup> Its buds are employed as an antidote to snake poison.<sup>[79]</sup> However, no studies on its ant venom or snake-killing properties have been found.

**Botanical description of Haridru**

*Haridru* is botanically known as *H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale/Syn. *Adina cordifolia* (Roxb.) Hook. f., which is a large, deciduous tree, found throughout the greater part of India, up to an altitude of 900 m in the sub-Himalayan tract, in the forests of south India, especially in the Eastern Ghats and Karnataka.<sup>[80]</sup> It is 30 m in height, gray-brown, exfoliating in small patches; it has blaze yellow, yellowish brown heartwood [Figure 4].

Its branches are horizontal; leaves are simple, opposite, decussate, stipulate, obovate, cauducous; petiolate, pubescent; orbicular or ovate lamina, cordate base, acuminate apex, margin entire, glabrous above, pubescent beneath, veins 5–7 from base, lateral veins 3–5 pairs, pinnate [Figure 5].



Figure 5: Leaves of *H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale

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Flowers bisexual, in axillary globose heads hypanthium, yellow, densely hairy; copular calyx, corolla five-ridged, finely hairy; stamens 5; anthers 1–2 mm long, oblong; ovary two-celled, inferior; many ovules on a pendulous placenta; style filiform; stigma globose [Figure 6].



Figure 6: Flower of *H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale

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Fruit is a brown capsule of two dehiscent cocci, turbinate; seeds many having tail at one end and a bifid wing at the other end.<sup>[80]</sup>

Due to the coining of synonyms with other plants in later lexicons, *Ahimara* described in *Ashtanga Nighantu* remained unnamed [Table 1]. Because the synonym *Aribheda* was mixed up with the name *Arimeda* [Table 1], the plant's identification became a point of contention.

Because another synonym offered by the author was *Haridruma*, which may eventually become *Haridru*, it can be deemed *Haridru*. *Haridru/H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale<sup>[80]</sup> has a yellow wood character that has been proven both classically and phytochemically, but its snake venom antidote or snake killing properties have not been thoroughly investigated; however, phytochemical and clinical studies are needed to confirm this property and establishing the botanical identity of this plant.

**Conclusion**

The botanical identity of the plant *Ahimara* was attempted to be deduced from etymological derivations and interpretations of synonyms described in *Ashtanga Nighantu*. Based on the interpretation of synonyms and a review of later studies and lexicons, *Haridru/H. cordifolia* (Roxb.) Ridsale may be considered *Ahimara*. *Iremeda*, in contrast, would not be apt to consider as *Ahimara*. Poor morphological information, misinterpretation of synonyms, and later lexicons combining synonyms with other species have all contributed to the domain of dubious identities. As a result, flora listed in *Ashtanga Nighantu* during that time period is unknown in this time period. To replicate these findings, future study should incorporate more of the lexicons and other treatises, as well as use experimental and clinical evidence as a backdrop.

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**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.



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