

Assessing Intern Students' Professional Commitment and Perspectives on Graduate Education

ID Hatice Polat, ID Mehtap Tan

Department of Internal Medicine Nursing, Atatürk
University Faculty of Nursing, Erzurum, Türkiye

Abstract

Background: Professional commitment is a concept that influences one's interest in continuing a profession and engaging in professional development after graduation. Postgraduate education plays a key role in supporting such development by offering valuable opportunities for individuals to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Aim: This study aimed to determine the level of professional commitment among intern students and their views on pursuing postgraduate education.

Methods: This descriptive study was conducted among intern students (n=315) at a Faculty of Nursing between May and June 2017. The research sample consisted of 251 intern students who voluntarily agreed to participate, without any sampling method being applied. Data were collected using the Nursing Professional Commitment Scale and an introductory form that included items on opinions about postgraduate education. Data analysis included frequency, mean, percentage distribution, Pearson correlation, t-test, and Kruskal-Wallis (KW) tests.

Results: The students' average score on the Nursing Professional Commitment Scale was 78.25±13.27. Subdimensions scores were as follows: "Willingness to Exert Effort" – 39.88±7.97, "Maintaining Professional Membership" – 23.29±6.33, and "Devotion to Goals and Values" – 15.08±2.92. The mean scores for total professional commitment, "Willingness to Exert Effort," and "Maintaining Professional Membership" were significantly higher among students who had voluntarily chosen the nursing profession (p<0.01). It was found that 63.3% of the students were considering postgraduate education, 38.6% aimed to pursue an academic career, and 77.7% believed that postgraduate education contributes to the professional identity of nursing.

Conclusion: Intern students who willingly chose the nursing profession demonstrated a higher level of professional commitment. Additionally, the majority of students were considering postgraduate education and viewed it as a key factor in enhancing the professionalism of the nursing field.

Keywords: Intern nurse, nursing student, postgraduate education, professional commitment

Introduction

A profession consists of a group of activities in which an individual specializes through a rigorous training process to sustain their livelihood. According to the definition by Lee,¹ a profession is "the work of individuals over a certain period to sustain their vital activities and earn financial income."¹ Professional commitment can be defined as "the development of one's professional skills, abilities and attitudes, gaining expertise in one's profession, and then placing value on one's profession by placing it at the centre of one's life."² To be successful in their profession, individuals must possess a deep sense of commitment that goes beyond the desire to earn money. Commitment is defined as "the force that drives an individual to act towards a particular goal." A nurse's professional commitment enables them to remain in their role for many years, embrace their work, view it as a career opportunity, and make future plans accordingly.¹ Individuals with a career-oriented mindset often make various investments to support their personal and professional development. They also formulate long-term goals and plans to enhance themselves and advance in their careers. Postgraduate education in nursing is a significant educational investment that fosters both personal and professional growth. In our country, postgraduate nursing education began in 1968.³ Gardner⁴ in 1992 highlighted the connection between professional commitment in nursing and the choice of the nursing profession and career paths. He defined a nurse's professional commitment as the intention to pursue a lifelong career in nursing.⁴ Professional commitment is shaped by four key factors: the willingness to put in effort; knowledge of and identification with the profession (including its maintenance and protection); belief in the goals and values of nursing; and the opportunity for career continuity.⁵⁻⁷ Similarly, Tsai et al.⁸ reported that most nurses with higher levels of professional commitment also exhibited greater career self-efficacy. Therefore, to enhance nurses' positive perceptions of their careers, their professional commitment should be strengthened. Commitment to the profession is a vital component of the working lives of both nurses and nursing students. A nurse must believe in and embrace professional values, strive to uphold them, seek continuous improvement in the professional field, and be determined to remain in the profession.^{1,8,9}

Nurses' commitment to their profession and their attitudes toward it play a crucial role in achieving professional status, delivering quality care to society, and building professional strength. Strengthening professional commitment and fostering a strong professional identity among nurses will lead to improvements in

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Corresponding author: Hatice Polat
E-mail: haticepolat@atauni.edu.tr

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both the quality of healthcare services and the profession's status. Furthermore, professional commitment contributes to nurses' professional development and promotes stability in their careers.¹⁰ In nursing, professional commitment begins to develop during the early stages of education. To sustain this commitment, it is recommended that, alongside the acquisition of core professional values during training, other human values, such as flexibility, sacrifice, honesty, kindness, and patience, be integrated into the curriculum.¹⁰

Postgraduate education offers in-depth and comprehensive learning in a chosen field. It also fosters positive attitudes, values, and habits of analytical thinking. One of its key aims is to highlight the importance of research in nursing practice and promote the use of evidence-based data in academic and clinical work. Postgraduate education enables the application of appropriate scientific principles to solve nursing-related problems and supports the development of new hypotheses.^{10,11} In nursing, postgraduate education contributes to both the personal development of individuals and the advancement of the profession.³ Therefore, evaluating the perspectives of nursing graduates on postgraduate education and their commitment to the profession is important.

A review of the literature reveals that there are studies in our country exploring students' views on postgraduate education.^{12–15} However, no studies have examined both nursing students' professional commitment and their views on postgraduate education. This study was conducted to evaluate the professional commitment of intern nursing students and their opinions about postgraduate education. It aims to contribute to the nursing literature by identifying the level of commitment among intern nurses, the factors influencing this commitment, and their perspectives on postgraduate education.

Research Questions

- What is the level of professional commitment among intern nurses?
- What are the views of intern nurses regarding postgraduate education?
- Does professional commitment influence views on postgraduate education?

Materials and Methods

Design

This research is descriptive in nature.

Sample of the Study

The study population consisted of 315 senior intern students from Atatürk University Faculty of Nursing. The study was completed with 251 (79.6%) intern students who volunteered to participate and were actively continuing their education between May 15 and June 15, 2017. No sampling method was used. A post hoc (experimental) power analysis was conducted to assess the adequacy of the sample size. In the power analysis, the statistical power of the study was calculated to be 0.99 at a significance level of 0.05 and a 95% confidence interval (based on a t-test comparison between two groups). The group statistics were as follows: $\bar{x}_1=82.48\pm12.73$, $\bar{x}_2=71.41\pm13.21$, with $n_1=155$ and $n_2=96$.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using an Introductory Form (which included questions to determine the students' demographic characteristics and their views on postgraduate education) and the Professional Commitment Scale.

Introductory Form

This form contains a total of 13 questions. Six questions assess students' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, parents' education level, family's economic status, motivation for choosing the nursing profession, and preferred position after graduation. The remaining seven questions explore students' views on postgraduate education. The section on postgraduate education was based on a review of the relevant literature.^{14,15}

Nursing Professional Commitment Scale

The Nursing Professional Commitment Scale (NPCS) was developed by Lu et al.⁵ in 2000 and adapted into Turkish by Çetinkaya et al.¹⁶ It is used to assess nurses' levels of professional commitment. The scale consists of 26 items and is structured as a four-point Likert-type scale. It includes three sub-dimensions: "Willingness to Exert

Effort," "Maintaining Professional Membership," and "Devotion to Goals and Values." Items 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 25 are reverse-coded. The total score ranges from 26 to 104. The sub-dimension score ranges are as follows: "Willingness to Exert Effort" – 13–52; "Maintaining Professional Membership" – 8–32; and "Devotion to Goals and Values" – 5–20. Higher scores indicate a greater level of professional commitment. In the original study, the internal consistency was reported as 0.94 for the overall scale, 0.88 for "Willingness to Exert Effort," 0.77 for "Maintaining Professional Membership," and 0.67 for "Devotion to Goals and Values."¹⁶ In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha values were 0.90 for the overall scale, and 0.91, 0.88, and 0.66 for the respective sub-dimensions.

Data Collection

Research data were collected in the Faculty of Nursing classrooms between May 15 and June 15, 2017. The data collection took place before or after the students' Internship I and II theoretical classes. The researcher explained the purpose and methodology of the study and invited students to participate. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Students who agreed to participate were given a survey form and asked to complete it. Completing the survey took approximately 10–15 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the SPSS 21 [Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA; Released 2012]. Descriptive statistics such as numbers, means, and percentage distributions were calculated. The Pearson correlation test, t-test, and Kruskal-Wallis (KW) test were used for analysis. The internal consistency of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Statistical significance was considered at $p<0.05$ and $p<0.01$.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct the study, official written approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Atatürk University Faculty of Nursing (Approval Number: 2017-4/11, Date: 08.05.2017) and the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Nursing. Participation in the study was voluntary, and both written and verbal informed consent were obtained from all participants.

Results

When the students' introductory characteristics were examined, the average age was found to be 22.47 ± 1.13 years. Of the participants, 78.1% were female, 55.8% reported that their mothers were primary school graduates, and 42.6% stated the same for their fathers. Additionally, 76.1% of students described their family's economic status as "moderate," and 61.8% indicated that they chose the nursing profession willingly. Regarding the positions students aspired to after graduation, 45.4% wished to work as nurses, 42.6% as educators, and 7.6% as managers (Table 1).

The mean scores from the scale measuring students' commitment to the profession, the total mean score was 78.25 ± 13.27 (3.00 ± 0.51). The subdimension scores were as follows: *Willingness to Exert Effort*: 39.88 ± 7.97 (3.07 ± 0.61); *Maintaining Professional Membership*: 23.29 ± 6.33 (2.91 ± 0.79); *Devotion to Goals and Values*: 15.08 ± 2.92 (3.01 ± 0.58) (Table 2).

It was found that female students had higher mean scores on the professional commitment scale compared to male students. However, this difference was statistically significant only in the subdimension of *Maintaining Professional Membership* ($p<0.05$) (Table 3).

The mean commitment scale scores of students who had willingly chosen the nursing profession were higher than those of students who had not, and this difference was statistically significant ($p<0.05$) (Table 3).

Although the mean commitment scores of students considering postgraduate education were higher than those of students not considering it, a statistically significant difference was found only in the *Devotion to Goals and Values* subdimension ($p<0.05$) (Table 3).

It was found that 63.4% of the students were considering postgraduate education. Among them, 22.7% preferred postgraduate education in psychiatric nursing, 38.6% aimed for an academic career, and 12.7% reported that they did not want to pursue postgraduate education due to a lack of foreign language skills. Additionally, 46.6% of the students were aware of the application requirements

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the students

Descriptive characteristics (n=251)	n	%	Descriptive characteristics (n=251)	n	%
Age group (21–30 years) (mean±SD)	22.47±1.13		Father's level of education		
Gender			High school graduate	66	26.3
Female	196	78.1	University graduate	26	10.4
Male	55	21.9	Family economic status		
Mother's level of education			Good	58	23.1
Illiterate	42	16.7	Moderate	191	76.1
Literate	13	5.1	Poor	2	0.8
Primary school graduate	140	55.8	Nursing profession selection status		
Secondary school graduate	27	10.8	Chose willingly	155	61.8
High school graduate	25	10.0	Did not choose willingly	96	38.2
University graduate	4	1.6	Preferred career path after graduation		
Father's level of education			To be a nurse	114	45.4
Illiterate	4	1.6	To be an educator	107	42.6
Literate	3	1.2	To be a manager	19	7.6
Primary school graduate	107	42.6	All of the above	4	1.6
Secondary school graduate	45	17.9	Other	7	2.8

n: Number, SD: Standard deviation.

Table 2. Students' professional commitment score averages

Scale	Min-max	Average score (item score average)
Willingness to exert effort	13–52	39.88±7.97 [3.07±0.61]
Maintaining professional membership	8–32	23.29±6.33 [2.91±0.79]
Devotion to goals and values	5–20	15.08±2.92 [3.01±0.58]
Total score	26–104	78.25±13.27 [3.00±0.51]

for postgraduate programs, 45.4% had not attended any information sessions on postgraduate education, and 77.6% believed that postgraduate education contributed to establishing a professional identity in nursing (Table 4).

Discussion

Professional commitment is defined as “*highlighting professional identity, making an effort for the profession one belongs to, and being committed to professional goals, values, norms and ethical principles*.”¹⁷ When the students' average scores for professional commitment were examined, it was found that the total mean score was above average. This finding is similar to the results of previous studies.^{10,16–18} One possible explanation for this result is the high percentage of students in this study who reported choosing the nursing profession willingly. Cihangiroğlu et al.¹⁹ noted that healthcare professionals tend to have higher levels of professional commitment compared to other occupational groups.¹⁷ Similarly, Ayaz-Alkaya et al.²⁰ found that internship programs positively influenced students' commitment to the profession and significantly increased their desire to work as nurses. The findings of earlier research support the results of this study.^{18,20} These results of the study are significant, as they suggest the presence of future nurses who are committed to practicing their profession willingly, are compassionate toward patients, provide high-quality nursing care, and have the potential to succeed in academic and managerial roles within the healthcare system.

As a result, it was determined that the students' average scores in the subdimensions of the Professional Commitment Scale (*Willingness to Exert Effort, Maintaining Professional Membership, and Devotion to Goals and Values*) were above average. *Willingness to Exert Effort* refers to students' readiness to make significant efforts on behalf of the profession. *Devotion to Goals and Values* measures students' belief in and alignment with the core goals and values of the nursing profession. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies.^{10,16,17,18,21} Ayaz-Alkaya et al.²⁰ found that internship programs positively influenced students' professional commitment and significantly increased their desire to work as nurses. Additionally,

Table 3. Comparison of students' professional commitment scores by selected characteristics

	Willingness to exert effort	Maintaining professional membership	Devotion to goals and values	Total score
Age	r=0.001 p=0.982	r=0.022 p=0.728	r=0.063 p=0.320	r=0.024 p=0.711
Gender				
Female	39.99±8.10 [3.08±0.62]	23.84±6.26 [2.98±0.78]	15.11±2.99 [3.02±0.60]	78.94±13.48 [3.03±0.52]
Male	39.47±7.53 [3.04±0.58]	21.35±6.27 [2.67±0.78]	14.96±2.67 [2.99±0.53]	75.78±12.32 [2.91±0.47]
	t=0.447 p=0.656	t=2.606 p=0.011*	t=0.343 p=0.733	t=1.644 p=0.103
Nursing profession selection status				
Chose willingly	42.16±7.42 [3.24±0.57]	25.01±6.09 [3.12±0.76]	15.31±2.94 [3.06±0.59]	82.48±12.73 [3.17±0.49]
Did not choose willingly	36.20±7.45 [2.78±0.57]	20.51±5.73 [2.56±0.72]	14.70±2.85 [2.94±0.57]	71.41±11.15 [2.74±0.43]
	t=6.172 p<0.001**	t=5.907 p<0.001**	t=1.633 p=0.104	t=7.241 p<0.001**
Interest in pursuing postgraduate education				
Yes	40.74±7.94	23.66±6.19	15.47±1.97	79.63±13.12
No	39.09±8.07	22.62±6.45	14.11±2.75	75.82±13.21
Undecided	37.74±7.64	22.68±6.74	15.23±3.14	75.89±13.47
	F=2.871 p=0.059	F=0.738 p=0.479	F=3.173 p=0.044*	F=2.377 p=0.095

*, p<0.05, **, p<0.001. r: Correlation, t: t-test, F: Analysis of variance.

Chang et al.⁹ reported that components of professional commitment were negatively affected by burnout. The fact that the sample in this study consisted of intern students who had not yet taken on professional job responsibilities (and were therefore less likely to experience burnout) may have contributed to these positive

Table 4. Students' views on postgraduate education (n=251)

	n	%
Interest in pursuing postgraduate education		
Yes	159	63.4
No	45	17.9
Undecided	47	18.7
Desired field of postgraduate education*		
Fundamentals of nursing	27	10.7
Internal medicine nursing	32	12.7
Surgical nursing	33	13.1
Women's health and diseases nursing	20	7.9
Child health and diseases nursing	24	9.5
Psychiatric nursing	57	22.7
Public health nursing	38	15.1
Nursing management	6	2.4
Unanswered	67	26.7
Reasons for choosing postgraduate education*		
To determine my area of expertise	49	19.5
To pursue an academic career	97	38.6
To contribute to the profession	40	15.9
To provide higher-quality care	22	8.7
To become a manager	12	4.7
Unanswered	61	24.3
Reasons for not pursuing postgraduate education*		
The available departments are not of interest	31	5.9
Low undergraduate GPA****	29	11.5
Insufficient financial resources	10	3.9
Inadequate performance on the ALES*** exam	11	4.3
Lack of foreign language proficiency	32	12.7
Other	13	5.1
Awareness of postgraduate education application requirements		
Fully aware	117	46.6
Not aware	54	21.5
Partially aware	65	25.9
Unanswered	15	6.0
Participation in postgraduate education-related events**		
Yes	79	31.5
No	114	45.4
I researched it independently	43	17.1
Unanswered	15	6.0
Perceptions of postgraduate education's contribution to the nursing profession		
It provides a professional identity to the nursing profession	195	77.6
It does not contribute to professional identity	10	4.0
It partially contributes to professional identity	28	11.2
I don't know	3	1.2
Unanswered	15	6.0

*: Students could select more than one option, **: Includes participation in information sessions, seminars, congresses, etc., ***: ALES (Academic Personnel and Graduate Education Exam) is a standardized test used in Türkiye to select and place students into postgraduate programs at Turkish universities after they have completed a bachelor's degree, ****: GPA (Grade Points Average) is a parameter used to select and place students in graduate programs in Türkiye.

results. In addition, the fact that most of the students who participated in the study chose the nursing profession willingly, that many were considering postgraduate education, and that the majority aspired to become nurses or educators after graduation may have influenced these results.

This study also found that the average professional commitment scores of female students were higher than those of male students. A statistically significant difference was observed in the *Maintaining Professional Membership* subdimension. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies.^{17,18,22–26} According to Tak et al.,²⁷ women are believed to have a higher normative commitment to their organization because they are more likely to be affected by the perceived cost of leaving their jobs compared to men. Several studies suggest that women tend to have higher professional commitment than men due to the belief that women make relatively greater sacrifices to achieve a certain professional status.^{18,27} In this study, it was also determined that students' age did not have a significant effect on their level of professional commitment. In their studies, Sarı¹⁸ and Derin et al.²⁴ reported differences between nurses' age groups and their levels of professional commitment; however, these differences were not statistically significant. In contrast, studies conducted by Hsu et al.,²¹ Cihangiroğlu et al.,¹⁹ and Demirci¹⁷ found that professional commitment increased significantly with age. Similarly, Dönmez and Karakuş,¹⁰ in their study with newly graduated nurses, found that young nurses had lower levels of professional commitment. In the present study, the fact that the students were of similar age and generally belonged to a younger age group may have contributed to the results observed.

The total professional commitment scores, as well as the scores in the subdimensions of *Willingness to Exert Effort* and *Maintaining Professional Membership*, were significantly higher among students who willingly chose the nursing profession compared to those who did not. In the results of studies by Sarı,¹⁸ Demirci,¹⁷ and Şimşek and Aslan,²⁸ it was found that nurses who voluntarily chose the profession had higher professional commitment scores compared to those who entered the profession unwillingly. Similarly, a study by Dönmez and Karakuş¹⁰ involving newly graduated nurses reported that those who chose the profession willingly demonstrated a higher level of professional commitment. In line with these findings, it is expected that individuals who do not willingly choose nursing, a self-sacrificing and demanding profession, would show lower levels of commitment. The literature also suggests that practicing a profession aligned with an individual's interests can positively influence both professional satisfaction and commitment.²⁴

In this study, the mean scores of students who were considering postgraduate education were higher in the *Devotion to Goals and Values* subdimension, and the difference was statistically significant. In the studies by Hsu et al.,²¹ Sarı,¹⁸ Ayaz-Alkaya et al.,²⁰ and Bulut and Çevik,²⁹ the mean scores for the *Devotion to Goals and Values* subdimension were found to be similar to the results of this research. Derin et al.²⁴ reported that negative perceptions about the profession may hinder mechanisms that support professional commitment, particularly when individuals question whether they truly desire to be in the profession. The high scores in the *Devotion to Goals and Values* subdimension in this study may be explained by the fact that more than half of the participating students chose the nursing profession willingly. Additionally, most students believed that postgraduate education contributes to establishing a professional identity for the nursing profession.

In this study, when students' views on postgraduate education were examined, it was found that more than half expressed a desire to pursue postgraduate education. Similarly, Karadaş et al.³⁰ found that 45.9% of nursing students wanted to pursue postgraduate education; in the study by Satır and Murat,³¹ this rate was 92.8%; Şen et al.³² reported 51%; Kavurmacı et al.³³ found 77.1%; Bozkurt et al.³⁴ reported 77.4%. The positive attitudes of student nurses toward pursuing postgraduate education are critical for gaining in-depth and comprehensive knowledge in their field of study, as well as for developing positive values, attitudes, and analytical thinking skills.³³ The importance of postgraduate education in training qualified human resources and fostering innovation in science and technology is widely recognized both in our country and around the world.³⁵

As a result of this study, it was found that most students believed postgraduate education would contribute to the professional identity of nursing, and some expressed a desire to become academicians. Many also reported being aware of the application requirements for postgraduate education. Similarly, in a study conducted by Kavurmacı et al.,³³ 45.3% of students stated their purpose for pursuing postgraduate education was to become academicians, and 52.7% were aware of the application requirements for postgraduate education. In another study by Erenoğlu,³⁶ 48.6% of students reported that their motivation for pursuing postgraduate education was to become academicians. In previous studies on career planning, it has been reported that becoming aware of career paths during student years,

and having the intention to pursue them, is important for developing professional competencies and facilitating the transition to professional life after graduation.³⁷⁻³⁹

In this study, approximately one-fourth of the students expressed a desire to pursue postgraduate education in psychiatric nursing. In earlier studies, students reported wanting to pursue postgraduate education in various departments such as surgical nursing, internal medicine nursing, nursing management and principles, and women's health and diseases nursing, often because they found these areas enjoyable, easier, or intriguing.^{31,34,40} One limitation of this study is that students were not asked why they wanted to pursue postgraduate education in psychiatric nursing, which restricts the ability to interpret this result. It is possible that many students who showed interest in psychiatric nursing were influenced by their positive experiences with a faculty member teaching the course or with the clinical setting where they completed their practice. According to previous studies, many factors influence individuals' decisions to pursue graduate education. These factors include program management, accessibility to academic staff, quality of education, course content, institutional reputation, and physical facilities. It has also been noted that students' preferences are influenced by the guidance they receive from faculty members during their undergraduate education.⁴¹

This study also explored reasons for not choosing postgraduate education. One in ten students reported that their foreign language skills were insufficient. It is recommended that foreign language education and international opportunities be expanded as part of university career development programs, and that students' awareness of these opportunities be increased to help them take full advantage of them. It was also found that only one-third of the students had participated in an information session on postgraduate education. In today's rapidly evolving world of technology and knowledge, scientific competence is increasingly being attained through master's and doctoral programs. Postgraduate education not only allows individuals to advance academically but also provides opportunities for personal and scientific development.⁴² In this context, raising students' awareness of the value and possibilities of postgraduate education is important.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to a single center and relied on self-reported data. Therefore, the results can be generalized only to this specific group.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that students' overall commitment to the nursing profession was above average. Students who voluntarily chose the nursing profession and those considering postgraduate education had higher levels of professional commitment. Female students scored higher than male students in the subdimension of *Maintaining Professional Membership*. Additionally, the majority of students expressed interest in pursuing postgraduate education. To enhance professional commitment, it is important to assess nursing students' commitment levels at the beginning of their education and in the subsequent years. Supporting students in developing a positive perception of the profession from the first year onward may positively influence their long-term professional commitment. Moreover, future research should consider evaluating individual characteristics and other factors that affect commitment. Providing regular guidance and counseling services, along with seminars, could help reduce students' concerns regarding postgraduate education and foreign language proficiency. It is recommended that congresses be organized on topics such as professional commitment and postgraduate education, with active student participation encouraged. Career counseling centers within universities should implement educational programs focused on foreign languages, studying abroad, postgraduate opportunities, and self-awareness. These centers should establish consistent communication with students starting from their first year.

Ethics Committee Approval: The study was approved by the Atatürk University Faculty of Nursing Ethics Committee [Approval Number: 2017-4/11, Date: 08.05.2017].

Informed Consent: Both written and verbal informed consent were obtained from all participants.

Conflict of Interests: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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