


# Building a community of the sighted people with the blind on the example of Dom Bożego Narodzenia in Niepołomice

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The aim of this article is to present how to build a community consisting of the sighted people and of the blind. Dom Bożego Narodzenia in Niepołomice in Poland is an example of such a community, as its members – the sighted people and the blind – form a community modelled on the family. The community was created out of the religious inspiration and its building is in accordance to the Christian values. In order to realise the aim of this article, the author interviewed 10 community members (both the sighted and the blind). The received answers were subjected to quality research. The article presents the teaching of the Catholic Church which concerns the community life of people with disabilities and those fully able-bodied. The next step was to present the characteristics of the residents of the nursing home in Niepołomice. Building the community was presented in two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension is connected with creating the community with God, and it is inspired by the Christian values in building the family relations. The horizontal dimension is connected with building the human community in its everyday life and in celebrating.

**Contribution:** The research undertaken on the community well-being of people with visual disabilities has shown that such people are able to participate subjectively in building a home community similar to a family with sighted people.

**Keywords:** community; disability; blindness; person with a disability; home.

In the recent decades, we have faced many initiatives which aim at normalisation of the life of people with disabilities (Banach 2014:8). Building a community with those people is a particular form of activity for the benefit of them. Such a community is meant as a unity of people which is interpersonal in nature. The term community in:

[T]heology means uniting of persons based on genuine and deep relations between entities (*communio personarum*); with regard to the human person it is rooted in the social nature of man which is expressed in aiming at the realization of its unique «self» in the community with others and under its positive influence. (Nadbrzeżny 2014:1000)

The aim of this article is to present building of the community of the sighted with the blind on the basis of Dom Bożego Narodzenia in Niepołomice in Poland, in its vertical and horizontal dimensions. It is a community of life and its members build it to make it resemble the family. The community was established in 1995. Building of the community highly benefited from the religiousness of its members. The community was created out of a religious inspiration and its members live by the Christian values. Building the home community is mainly based on the everyday sharing of duties.

There was no early scientific research at the Christmas House. There are also no scientific publications about it. Previously, there was writing on the integrative role of school and educational centres for children and young people with visual disabilities (Jablonska-Deptuła 2002). There are also studies on the care of visually impaired people in classical social welfare homes (Bąk 2003:200–208), their education (Majewski 1997), and the community-forming role of vocational rehabilitation (Sitko 2003:151–176).

In order to realise the aim of this article, the author interviewed three sighted community members and seven blind members. The supervisor of the nursing home, the sighted and the blind each had a separate different questionnaire for the interview. The questionnaires consisted only of open-ended questions so that the interviewed could freely and exhaustively express

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their opinions and thoughts. It resulted from the fact that the blind people also suffered from mental disabilities. Their way of answering the questions is highly individual in nature. Therefore, they were able to freely answer the questions. The received research material was also subjected to a qualitative analysis.

In order to realise the aim of the article, it was necessary to firstly present the teaching of the Catholic Church with regard to people with disabilities and with the sighted. It was necessary to present the idea and the origin of Dom Bożego Narodzenia which is realisation of the community of the sighted people with the blind. The next step was to present the residents of the nursing home with their specificity and the roles which they play in the community. Building the community was presented in two aspects: in the vertical aspect, as well as in the religious aspect, through presenting the role of religiousness in building the community and in the life of an individual, and in the horizontal dimension, realised in everyday life and in the cyclical events during the year.

## The community with people with disabilities in the teaching of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church teaches that a person with disabilities is fully a human subject with their natural (inborn) and inviolable rights. Disability of the body and of senses or the intellectual deficiencies do not, to any extent, diminish their personhood. Every human being has their own unique dignity and their own individual value, regardless of the degree of their development, or their physical or mental condition. The inalienable value of a human being, that is dignity, results from the fact that everyone is God's child, who was called to life to the image and likeness of God (John Paul II 2000:34). The Catholic Church insists that a person with disabilities, with deficiencies inscribed into their body and psyche and with the suffering caused by them, embodies the mystery of humanity, emphasising its greatness and dignity. An able-bodied person, while facing disability, is in a way introduced by God into the mystery of human existence and thanks to that he can see a person with disabilities with greater respect and love (the Holy See 1984).

As a person with disabilities is fully a human subject and is entitled to the equal rights as an able-bodied person, he or she should be entitled to the individual development and to easy access to the life in the society. According to the Catholic Church, the support for people with disabilities should involve the principles of personalisation, integration and normalisation. The principle of personalisation indicates that in every aspect of acting for the benefit of such people, it should first and foremost regard, protect and support their dignity. Respecting the dignity enables the further proper care for the life conditions of people with disabilities and for their integral development in every dimension and in their potential physical, mental and moral abilities.

The principle of integration entails the requirement to regard people with disabilities as the subjects of community life. The Holy See indicates the necessity of the subjective commitment of such people into the family and social life, in order to enable them, to the best of their abilities, to realise their vocation for marriage and the family, to work professionally, to participate in the cultural, political and religious activities. Supporting the subjectivity and engagement of people with disabilities in the public life, the principle of integration opposes to the tendency of isolation, segregation and marginalisation. This principle is combined with the principle of normalisation of the life of people with disabilities. This means the necessity to make the effort which aims at complete rehabilitation. It indicates the need for using various techniques and means to realise this aim. In case, however, when the full rehabilitation is not possible, the principle of normalisation indicates the necessity to create such conditions for living and activity for people with disabilities which are the most similar to the ordinary conditions in the certain community (the Holy See 1984).

Christians are the ones particularly called to build social life with the subjective participation of people with disabilities. As the disciples of Christ, they are called to realise his call to practise love of the neighbour, especially for the poor. In the teaching of the Catholic Church, the poor are not only the people suffering from economic poverty, but also the sick, the homeless, the elderly, and those with disabilities (the Catechism of the Catholic Church No. 2248–2249). Christians are to be the followers of Christ who was not indifferent of the fate of those with disabilities. The gospel contains numerous testimonies of the healing from disabilities, also with the blind, as well as the encouragement to support such people. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council encourages the faithful to undertake the work motivated by mercy and to provide aid to those who need it (the Second Vatican Council II 1965). Among the poor, there are also those with disabilities.

It follows from the teaching of the Catholic Church that the family of a person with disabilities should be taken particular care of (see Francis 2016). This regards both the families with a disabled child and the families consisting of parents with disabilities. The family is the source of love and solidarity for the disabled child. The family constitutes the best environment for the child's personal development, especially when such a child is most vulnerable, and his abilities are limited. The child needs care, concern and tenderness. He should feel wanted, loved and cherished for what he is, with all his unique abundance. The Pontifical Council for the Family indicated that the parents' conduct should introduce joy and kindness into the lives of the able-bodied and the disabled children so that their life together could be satisfactory for all the family members. In the atmosphere of love and acceptance, a child with disabilities can learn how to communicate with others, how to experience the community life with his parents and siblings. According to this Dicastery, the family cannot give up this mission and must not assume negative attitudes towards the child with disabilities (the Pontifical Council for the Family 2001).

The family is based on God's love and he called all the disabled and able-bodied family members alike to the community with him. Therefore, an important task of the parents is to indicate God as the source of love. First of all, it results into presenting disability not as a kind of God's punishment, but as a specific way on which God calls humans to cooperate with him. Perceiving oneself as a chosen child of God helps the child with disabilities to feel as an equal family member. It also helps in undertaking subjective tasks in the family and outside the family. Mainly it helps to discover God as the Father for whom the child is important and who takes care of him. Parents' aid is also necessary in establishing and developing personal relations with God. The relations are developed through listening and meditating over God's word, through the prayer and, in case of Catholics, also through receiving sacraments. The task of the parents is to build the family community as the community with God and with the family members, which is based on love (the Pontifical Council for the Family 2001).

The teaching of the Catholic Church also indicates the negative attitudes of parents towards their child with disabilities, which can be manifested as: rejection, anxiety, the inability to take decisions, overprotection and withdrawal. The latter attitude is the most negative and destructive because it often leads to leaving the child. In that case, the child is under the care of third parties who care for the child's education, rehabilitation and integration. However, despite their competence and engagement, the third parties staff members are not able to provide for the child as his real family in fulfilling all the family functions (Benedict XVI 2001).

## The idea of the community and the residents of Dom Bożego Narodzenia

A community that comprises people with additional intellectual disabilities is a life-time project. It involves people who mainly come from dysfunctional families. They were not properly educated at home by their parents and they did not receive proper love. The experience of their family home has left a painful shade in their psyche which, in many cases, is not possible to heal. The aim of this nursing home care is to create a family community which resembles a proper family home with the atmosphere of love, in which they can share their love with other residents. Such a home does not resemble typical nursing homes which are created for elderly people or for those with disabilities, where these people are residents. This home does not resemble the typical residential care homes organised for elderly or incapacitated people where they are residents. Dom Bożego Narodzenia is based on the idea of a family in which people with disabilities are treated in a subjective way. The able-bodied residents of the home care for satisfying the psychological needs of those with disabilities, particularly the need for acceptance, love and the feeling of self-worth.

The subjective way of treating people with disabilities is the basis for the social and religious integration (Wandrasz 2004:15–16). In the life of the home community, a strong

emphasis is put on the subjectivity of the residents with disabilities. Experiencing their subjectivity enhances their building of the feeling of being useful. They want, despite their physical and mental disabilities, to be the full-fledged community members and to actively participate in the life of their community. Similar to other people, they want to be needed and they want to give a gift of self to others. Thus, they get engaged into the daily activities, such as preparing the meals, cleaning or working in the garden. Their subjective engagement into the life of their community enhances building the feeling of self-worth.

The nursing home Dom Bożego Narodzenia hosts 18 residents, 15 of whom are blind men with partial mental disability. Some of them additionally suffer from chronic somatic diseases such as diabetes and epilepsy. There are no women with disabilities at this nursing home. The men are 40–61 years old. They started to live in this nursing home as young people. They came there because their families did not want to or were unable to take care of them (Interviewee No. 4; No. 6; No. 8). Some of the men no longer have their family homes or any contact with their siblings (Interviewee No. 5; No. 7; No. 9; No. 10). Their fate is typical for many people who suffer from multiple disabilities – sensory and intellectual ones, in Poland – and they do not have proper care in their family homes (see Stala 2007:35–36; Wandrasz 2003:95–106). Another reason for their staying in this nursing home is the fact that if they were in typical social welfare homes which are maintained by social institutions, they would not be able to live in the home-like conditions which are provided by Dom Bożego Narodzenia. The reasons for creating such a nursing home are reflected in the evangelical call to bear witness to mercy for those who need it the most (Żywczok 2007:60–63).

The household community also consists of the able-bodied persons. There is a Catholic priest who lives there and who is the founder of the home and the head of it.<sup>1</sup> Apart from him, there are also two lay people, a woman<sup>2</sup> and a man.<sup>3</sup> These people consider living with people with disabilities as their life vocation. They are single who do not have their own families and they consider being with the people with disabilities and for them as their self-fulfilment (Interviewee No. 1).

The woman who lives there, because of her age and experience, is treated by the majority of the disabled residents as an auntie or even as a mother (Interviewee No. 5). She provides them with family warmth which they had never experienced at home. They feel loved by her and think that she creates the specific family home atmosphere

1. The priest is middle-aged. He has experience in working with blind people. Before working in the nursing home, he worked as the diocesan and domestic pastoral care priest for the blind in Poland. He also worked as a chaplain in the school and educational centre for blind and visually impaired children and young people.

2. The woman is retired. She started working with blind people as an adult in the centre for blind children. She was going there to help them even when she was working as a volunteer. After retiring, she decided to totally devote to serving blind people and she moved in Dom Bożego Narodzenia in Niepołomice (Interviewee No. 2).

3. The man is middle-aged. He came across the community of the blind as a result of his vocation. As a young man, he faced the life decision concerning his future. Following the advice of his spiritual guide, he met the community of Dom Bożego Narodzenia and he moved in on a trial basis. After some time, he discovered that living with the blind was his vocation (Interviewee No. 3).

(Interviewee No. 10). Her attitude enhances their openness and thanks to her they are open to eagerly help others (Interviewee No. 9). The man, because of his age, is treated by the residents as a brother (Interviewee No. 5). What is important for them is that they have the opportunity to share their problems, which stem from their masculinity. They can also learn how to perform the manly tasks in the domestic as well as in the social life, as in their family homes and in the centre for the blind they would never experience the masculinity traits (Interviewee No. 8).

The residents of the nursing home try to create a family atmosphere in which friendship plays an important role. Friendly relations built by the sighted are taken as a model by the people with disabilities; they think that friendship plays an important role in building the community bonds and the family atmosphere at the nursing home (Interviewee No. 6). Although they all try to treat one another in a family-like and friendly way, some of the relationships are definitely closer than others. They result from shared interests and the similar spiritual values and the similar way of experiencing disabilities. Their friendly relationships make them eagerly spend time with one another. They often go for a walk together (Interviewee No. 5), pray and work together (Interviewee No. 6). The family atmosphere of the nursing home is created by all the blind residents, despite their different characters. They are certainly aware that the nursing home is their common good, while other residents of the home are kind to them and are ready to help them any time they need it. Friendships between the blind men are long-lasting because they have undergone various life crises (Interviewee No. 9).

## Building the community in the vertical dimension

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of people with disabilities in Poland. It helps to find the meaning of their disabilities and come to terms with their influence in life. It has an impact on the mental condition of the people with disabilities as it is the source of peace and a factor enhancing the sense of security. Religiousness helps in the development of marriage and the family as well as in the social integration of the people with disabilities. It also has a significant influence on the professed values, on seeking the meaning of life, of suffering and of death. Religion plays a community-forming role, including in the community of people with disabilities. The Catholic Church in Poland strives to create a human community on the model of the family (Janocha 2011:385–397).

Religion plays a substantial role in the life of the residents of Dom Bożego Narodzenia and in them building the family community. The nursing home was established on the basis of the Christian values in order to help the weakest members of the society who are at risk of marginalisation and loneliness. The founder of the home and the sighted people who are a part of the community perceive their engagement as a vocation in the religious sense: they see it as a gift from

God who chose them to the service for the sick and people with disabilities. They perceive the realisation of this vocation as answering God's call. It is a lifetime project which comprises all the aspects of their personal and community life. Being faithful to their service for the people with disabilities is perceived by them as being faithful to God and therefore they treat it in a serious and responsible way (Interviewee No. 2).

Combining personal life with God and perceiving the life among people with disabilities who also suffer from other illnesses as a life vocation result in the sighted residents of the home building bonds with people with disabilities in a personal way. As a result, they treat the blind residents as the persons close to them and whom they treat in an emotional way. They treat them as brothers; they feel responsible for them and thanks to that they can build the community with them which is based on the family community. Brotherly love, which is rooted in the Christian love for the neighbour, is binding the bonds between them (Interviewee No. 3). It also constitutes the background for the family atmosphere of the nursing home (Interviewee No. 10).

Experiencing the good which comes from the Christian love of the neighbour, the men with disabilities reciprocate it. The good given to them is also the source of reflection on its origin and on the motivation of the people who offer the good to them by giving them the gift of self. They reflect on God's presence in the life of humans, both the able-bodied and those with disabilities. Reflecting on the meaning of disabilities and suffering in the atmosphere of the Christian love, they change their perception of God and of his role in the life of humans. Within the limits of their intellectual disability, they deepen their personal relations with God, treating him more and more as the Father and the Giver of the good. Some of the blind consider God to be the greatest value of the home (Interviewee No. 8).

Living in the friendly atmosphere and reciprocation of the good to the sighted members of the community results in building the relations based on Christian love. Every blind resident feels responsible for the other community members, both the disabled and the able-bodied. Their friendship makes them devote more time and attention to some of them (Interviewee No. 6). The source of the vertical community is not a mere human consensus, but a personal relationship with Christ on the model of his unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Vertical community is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is also a participation in the Trinitarian life of God. It requires on the part of believers, including those with disabilities, an active response from God to his love and invitation to community (Nadbrzeżny 2014:1000).

The development of the altruistic attitudes requires the ongoing religious formation. The chapel in the nursing home is the most encouraging space to enhance the deepening of the religious atmosphere and the religiousness of the residents. It is the centre of the community and individual life of the residents. The Holy Mass is celebrated there every

day and every resident can participate in it. On Sundays and other holidays, the chapel can also host visitors at the Mass (see Lipiec 2022:7). Every day the residents can pray together in the morning and in the evening. At a convenient time, they can go to confession. Participation in the common prayers is not obligatory; however, almost everybody can take part in them (Lipiec 2011:326). Both the sighted and the blind treat the prayer as a method for deepening their personal bonds with God and for satisfying their religious needs and as a way of building community through the prayer for everyone and in common prayer intentions (Interviewee No. 1).

The chapel is a space for the personal prayer in silence and concentration. Both the sighted and the blind residents of the home often make use of this possibility. The prayer gives them strength to face everyday challenges, to endure the obstacles resulting from their disabilities and to realise their life vocation the best way (Interviewee No. 3).

Experiencing all the events during the calendar year is also done in a religious way here. Celebrating name days which is connected with reminding of the saint patrons of each resident is also community-oriented and individual in nature. And so is the celebration of feast of the Resurrection of Christ, the most important holiday in the Catholic Church. The residents of the nursing home participate in the events of the Paschal Triduum in their parish church, and at home, there is the ceremonial blessing of food for the Easter feast. The food is prepared with the help of the sighted. The blind attach great importance to the common celebration at the Easter table.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to that, they also ceremoniously celebrate Christmas. It is preceded by the Christmas Eve,<sup>5</sup> during which the residents wish one another all the best and give one another presents. After the festive supper, those who want can go to the parish church for the Christmas midnight Mass. After the celebration of Christmas, the nursing home hosts the pastoral visit of a priest.<sup>6</sup> All the residents are visited by a priest and receive the holiday blessing. During the Christmas period, the residents perform the holiday nativity play. It shows the story of Jesus' nativity. It is prepared under the guidance of a professional actor. The audience consists of the local inhabitants (Interviewee No. 1). The blind residents are very eager to participate in the religious celebrations. They eagerly participate in the liturgy and in the prayer, and get engaged into the accompanying events.

4. In Poland, the celebration of the Christ's Resurrection lasts for 2 days. It is followed by the Paschal Triduum. Traditionally, Polish people feast together which can last for a few hours.

5. Christmas Eve is celebrated one day before Christmas. The Christmas supper is very festive and it consists of specially prepared dishes which do not contain meat. The number and the kinds of dishes are particularly determined by the tradition. During the Christmas Eve supper, a part of the gospel on Jesus' nativity is read and the participants pray together and they wish one another all the best sharing the properly prepared bread called *opłatek* [the wafer]. At the end of the supper, the participants sing Christmas carols – the special occasional songs.

6. *Koleśa* [the pastoral visit] is the visit of a parish priest to the families in the parish. It takes place after Christmas. Such a visit consists of two parts: the common prayer of the priests with the present family members (with the blessing) and a pastoral conversation.

## Building the community in the horizontal dimension

The main idea of Dom Bożego Narodzenia is to make life in the nursing home resemble the family life. This means that all of the residents, including the blind, are subjectively engaged into the care for the home. The range of this care depends on the limitations which result from blindness, the intellectual disability and the somatic diseases of each particular resident. However, the sighted try to make it possible for the people with disabilities to get engaged for the common good. The blind also want to actively participate in the everyday life of the home and try to do their best for others. The majority of the blind get engaged into the household chores. They help to prepare meals and clear the table;<sup>7</sup> they do that with the support of the sighted who indicate certain activities, coordinate their performance, help to locate certain object in the space and, when it is necessary, help to perform certain tasks. Such an engagement reflects the need of the blind to build the community (Kosmala 2012:110–122). Community in the horizontal dimension is understood as a:

[C]ollectivity or social group with a strong internal bond, an organized system of relations between individuals. It is characterized by a high degree of identification and emotional involvement of members. The plane of belonging is the acceptance of community values and goals, dominant about converging with the interests of individuals. (Cynarzewska-Włażlik 2014:2001–2202)

According to their possibilities, the blind residents maintain the tidiness of their rooms and help to clean the common rooms such as the hall and yard. One of the residents is keen on growing plants and he takes care of the plants and bushes in the garden and in the yard. In autumn, all the disabled residents, according to their possibilities, get engaged into picking up fruit and vegetables and making jams and other fruit and vegetables products from the ones available in their garden. However, it should be noticed that the blind residents do not have their permanent duties, but they only temporarily help in the household chores to which they are encouraged. It is the result of their intellectual disabilities. One of the characteristic traits of their condition is the fact that they want to see the effects of their activity immediately. What is more, the performed tasks have to be attractive and engaging for them, otherwise they get bored and discouraged easily (Interviewee No. 1).

The multifaceted rehabilitation of the people with disabilities is necessary in the contemporary social and family life. It aims at the development of their personal potential and the involvement into the holistically perceived community life (Sienkiewicz 2003:124–136). The therapeutic activities which take place in Dom Bożego Narodzenia aim at the development of the community. In the nursing home, there is a studio in which, guided by a therapist, the blind residents make various objects mainly out of wood. These objects are not

7. The chores which they are able to do involve laying the table, peeling vegetables, and helping in the kitchen. Almost everybody is able to bring the dishes from the table and clear the table (Interviewee No 1).

sold, but they are given away as gifts on various occasions. They are given in the first place to those celebrating birthdays or name days. Everybody celebrates his or her birthday or name day in the nursing home. After celebrating the Holy Mass and the common prayer, the residents gather around the birthday boy and/or girl to wish them all the best and give them handmade gifts. In this way, they express their closeness and give something which they consider to be a part of themselves. In the evening after the supper, there is a concert to commemorate the birthday. Some of the blind can play musical instruments. The concert is the manifestation of their respect and closeness (Interviewee No. 1).

On occasions, the residents make some objects in the studio which are exhibited in the rooms of the local parish before Christmas. The parishioners can admire the handmade Christmas decorations which they can receive as a gift. Giving the decorations to the parishioners, the blind want to prove that they are not only the recipients of aid but they want to experience their subjectivity and the ability to be useful in the human and ecclesial community. Exhibiting their handmade products and giving them to the local inhabitants have the integration dimension. Thus, the blind with their initiatives come out beyond their home. With the help of the local parson and the parishioners, they get involved into the life of the local community.

The artistic activity of the residents of the nursing home in Niepołomice is also a great integrational factor. On the occasion of Christmas and the parish church fair, the blind can prepare the commemorative performances which are staged in the church or in the parish hall. Performing in the plays gives the people with disabilities joy and satisfaction. Performing for the sighted audience enhances their self-esteem and the feeling of being useful. The artistic activity of the blind residents of Dom Bożego Narodzenia is very inclusive in nature (Interviewee No. 1).

The openness of the nursing home in Niepołomice enhances the social and religious integration. The home has its own chapel for the residents and for the visitors from the town. On Sundays, it is open for everybody. The local inhabitants attend the Mass in the chapel in order to pray with the residents of the nursing home. After the Mass, all the participants meet at the table to talk. Thus, they deepen the bonds between the residents of the nursing homes and the neighbours and other guest who offer them interest and liking. Opening of the nursing home for the local inhabitants is a response to the spiritual and social needs of the people with disabilities; the need to satisfy which is proclaimed by the Catholic Church (Choroszewska 2012:105).

## Conclusion

Building the community of the sighted with the blind in the nursing home Dom Bożego Narodzenia is a notable phenomenon. The uniqueness results first of all from the fact that the residents of the home try to create a family-like community. The community does not resemble any common social welfare home in which the residents with disabilities

are mainly the recipients of care and aid. The disabled residents of the nursing home in Niepołomice are treated like family members and they shape their relations to make them resemble the relationships of relatives. The distinctiveness of building the community of Dom Bożego Narodzenia also results from the fact that the blind residents are the subjects actively engaged into creating the community. They feel responsible for building the community and for all its members, the sighted and the blind. The uniqueness is emphasised by the fact that the majority of them suffer from intellectual disabilities and serious somatic afflictions. The distinctiveness of building the community in Niepołomice is also supported by the fact that it was created from religious inspiration and its members are guided by the Christian values. Building the community with people suffering from disabilities is difficult. That is probably the reason why there is only one such community in Poland.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author contributions

D.L. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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### Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

### Disclaimer

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