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# Aspirations and frustrations: experiences of recent refugees in the Netherlands

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## Aspirations and frustrations: experiences of recent refugees in the Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

One year after the so-called migration crisis we investigate how refugees who arrived in these dramatic circumstances are managing their lives in the Netherlands. We choose not to employ the common approach with indicators of integration theories, since we argue that that is a destination-country perspective. Instead we choose the perspective of the refugees themselves who have migrated to fulfil certain life aspirations and who compare the starting point of their trip with their destination in terms of freedom in fields of life. From this perspective, a stream of frustrations becomes visible, which is a result that otherwise remains hidden. This is caused by both disappointments and the particular characteristics of the receiving society. We will illustrate this for the two largest refugee groups who arrived in the Netherlands in this specific period, Syrians and Eritreans, and show how they constitute very different examples.

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### Introduction

Most scholars who study how immigrants cope in a destination country employ some kind of integration theory, though with differing terminology (e.g. acculturation, assimilation). Within this line of thinking, the most-used indicators of integration are language acquisition, education, labour-market status and income, and sometimes cultural and social adaptation. More abstractly, the literature distinguishes legal-political, socio-economic and cultural-religious dimensions (Garcés-Mascarñas and Penninx 2015, 14–19). Intentionally or not, the perspective of the destination societies, and particularly of governments, seems to dominate in this thinking. Usually refugees do not show a high “integration” score, because the comparison group is the

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native born, and government policy is implemented to overcome this discrepancy. The point of view of immigrants themselves, who might start by comparing their starting point and earlier aspirations before migration with the situation in the destination country, is completely missing. Maybe their most important goal is not to become in all aspects similar to a native citizen, but just to have a family with children. We think that a more comprehensive picture of how refugees manage their lives will arise if we draw on the literature on agency and aspirations. This will not only lead to a more complete picture of how newcomers cope but also gives more insight into the often huge problems that occur in the realization of aspirations.

The ideas on aspirations and capabilities originate from the work of Amartya Sen (1999), and were first applied to migrants by Carling (2002, 2014), followed by De Haas (2011), Castles (2010) and Van Heelsum (2016). They were then applied to the migration decision itself, but it would be new to test if they could be used to study life after migration. Aspirations refer to future perspectives, which migrants would like to realize to have a “satisfactory life”. What a “satisfactory life” implies can differ for groups and in circumstances, so we need a set of fields of life that can be further investigated to analyse refugees’ aspirations. Sen argues that the well-being of people generally improves when their agency increases, as does the number of possibilities to make choices in many fields of life. In his home country of India, Sen shows how development particularly leads to an increase in the choices people have, therefore adding to substantive freedoms. If development is freedom, migration can lead to more freedom.

Ingrid Robeyns (2007) explains in her overview article that Sen never presented a definite list of fields of life, since lists suffer from unavoidable categorization problems. However, after a good summary, she derives the following main fields: (1) health: not only access to enough clean water, protection from infection, affordable access to medical facilities and medicine, but also the knowledge about how to remain healthy; (2) food: a sufficient, clean and varied food supply and the knowledge about how to remain well nourished; (3) income: access to income under acceptable working conditions, working hours and hierarchical relations, so that one can take care of a family; (4) education: quality of the education system, teachers, books and possibilities to advance; (5) justice: rule of law, real political participation and freedom of expression protected; (6) community activities that make it possible to cope with the struggles of daily life and that foster real friendships and meaningful social structures and (7) culture: the possibility to live with tradition, cultures and common norms. We think that for our purpose the above list is useful, though we believe it is necessary to extend the scope a little. Thinking of the needs of immigrants, we would like to add “access to information” to the fifth category, and “the ability to speak a language (home or new language)” and “the right to practice one’s religion” to the seventh category.

When people start to dream about a better life and think this will be possible through migration, the level of the aspirations is often high. Carling (2002, 2014) gives examples of Cape Verdean youngsters who think there is no life of an acceptable level possible without migration. Here, migration has become the only narrative for acquiring a good life. When this narrative becomes very common, for instance among the youngsters in a country, a so-called culture of migration develops. In southern Mexico, youngsters are expected to migrate, and migration has become part of the community's values, as Kandal and Massey (2002) describe. Alongside Cape Verde and Mexico, this phenomena has been described for several other countries, including Morocco (De Haas 2003). The high expectations of future migrants are often described. However, the reality of life in a new country is usually much more difficult than imagined. When aspirations are not fulfilled, frustrations are unavoidable and can be multiple.

In the Netherlands, the frustrations of the recent refugee immigrants are not often described. Therefore, we will now explore what kind of aspirations and frustrations are observable among the Syrians and Eritreans who arrived during the 2015–16 “crisis”.

### **The 2015–16 refugee influx to the Netherlands**

The recent influx of refugees to the Netherlands was part of what was labelled as the migration “crisis” in the summer of 2015. Though the number of people who moved illegally through international borders provoked the use of the word “crisis”, actually this wording better describes the horrible conditions in which they were forced to search for legal refugee status, and the inability of governments to offer solutions. Pallister-Wilkins (2016, 312) clarifies how the label “crisis” analytically and practically functions as a sticking plaster to hide deeper systemic wounds, including European border controls making safe and legal routes impossible. High numbers of migrants drowned in the Mediterranean Sea; women and children walked in the snow across the Balkans; and even now, they often sleep in small tents in areas with scorpions and snakes. At the time of writing, spring 2017, we no longer speak of a crisis, but that is misleading, since the socio-political landscape of the struggles that caused the refugee stream has not changed (Pallister-Wilkins 2016, 312). Even when one does not consider this full picture and only looks at the number of boat migrants, while crossings from Turkey to Greece have diminished in 2017 compared to 2015, crossings to Italy have actually increased (UNHCR 2016, 2017a).

Analysing in terms of Robeyns' aforementioned fields, with our additions, we will enhance insight into the way in which the refugees who arrived in the Netherlands under these dangerous circumstances are coping 18 months later. We will see how aspirations have been realized, but we also

end up analysing how aspirations often turn into frustrations, related to the structure of the destination society.

### ***Syrian refugees***

Ten years ago most of the current Syrian refugees had no intentions to leave to Europe, even though the Syrian state was always a tightly controlled repressive political structure. Protests against this repression, starting with the Arab Spring, the chaos caused by the invasion of Iraq and the consequent development of ISIS, the involvement of the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and the situation around the Kurds, are only some of the factors that have turned Syria into a battlefield where millions have been forced out of their country. The first, initially temporary, target destination of the displaced was understandably one of the neighbouring countries: Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey. But the war has lasted for a number of years, and the circumstances and lack of perspective in and outside refugee camps were unbearable. Basic requirements, including enough food or schooling for children, were not available (Van Heelsum 2016; Chatty 2017). With this lack of perspective, those desperate enough and with money to pay for the trip decided to travel further. Between 2011 and 2017, 5 million Syrian refugees were registered by the UNHCR, of which 937,718 applied for asylum in Europe (UNHCR 2017b).

Among those Syrians who arrived in the Netherlands in 2015, there are many from cities like Damascus and Aleppo who had a middle-class lifestyle. Some had even been in Europe before while working for international firms or on holiday. Not all were politically active, but were just caught between fighting factions. There were also people from smaller communities, for instance on the border of Iraq, where ISIS had taken over and attacks were mounted by the ISIS' enemies. Understandably, many were traumatized not only by war and dangerous travel experiences, but also worries about family and friends left behind and about the state of the conflict. Aspirations are therefore focussed around living in freedom and peace and at most regaining a lost lifestyle.

### ***Eritrean refugees***

The second-largest refugee group in the Netherlands in the 2015–16 period comes from Eritrea. Structural factors drive migration, such as the heavily controlled environment and particularly the potentially endless national service, which immobilizes the majority of young people and blocks economic development (Hirt and Saleh Mohammad 2013; UN Human Rights Council 2015). Stevis and Parkinson (2016) explain how:

teenagers are inducted at the Sawa military base, follow four months of training, then take an exam that determines whether they are put in active service or allowed to continue their education as reservists. Around two-thirds are immediately mobilized as soldiers. But all remain conscripts, often for decades. They are

locked in a system that pays a monthly stipend of 500 nakfa, about \$10 on the black market, and forbidden to leave the country.

In this system, most people end up without further education and unable to earn enough to support themselves or others, let alone to build up a career or a family. The structural militarization of society has caused anomie, family disintegration and problems with food production. Those who have been in national service often have traumatic experiences, since its system is brutal, meaning that recruits are subjected to violence and are forced to execute it on others (Hirt and Saleh Mohammad 2013; UN Human Rights Council 2015; Van Reijssen and Mawere 2017).

Mellina Belloni's study (2016) provides further insight into the aspirations of Eritrea's prospective migrants, and she points at signs of a "culture of migration". For young people in Eritrea, moving out of the country seems *the only way* to improve their lives, firstly to avoid conscription or to escape from national service, then to earn a sufficient salary and take care of their family, and thirdly to achieve an acceptable lifestyle. This also explains why many Eritreans keep travelling after having reached the safety of Ethiopia or Sudan, and take the decision in social networks that they want to move further. The salaries are low in these neighbouring countries and they still "have to struggle". Whereas the majority of Eritreans come from the countryside and do not know much about the world, urban Eritreans construct an image of a successful modern life by observing family and friends who live abroad, which evokes the feeling that those in Eritrea are "left behind" (Belloni 2016, 76). Their families depend heavily on remittances, since other forms of economic activity are very limited, so it is necessary to go to a place where the salaries are high enough to pay your own maintenance and that of the family back home.

### **Refugee arrival chronologically**

We skip the horrifying journey, just mentioning that passing through Libya, a voyage in an unsafe boat, and other forms of misery leave nobody without a trauma (RMMS 2014). We continue with asylum seekers' experiences in the Netherlands after their arrival. We first consider the situations which asylum seekers encounter, chronologically, and then discuss their aspirations.

### ***The asylum procedure***

The Dutch authorities placed asylum seekers who arrived during the peak period in 2015–16 in emergency shelters. The first frustrations developed immediately and were caused by the asylum procedure. The emergency shelters were set up in sports halls using camp beds, in quickly erected tents, or in old school buildings, prisons and old people's homes. Conditions were

extremely uncomfortable, with six to twenty men or women in one tent or room being the norm, and microwave meals for dinner. Due to tiredness, lack of privacy, stress and disappointment about the situation, on top of worries about family left behind, fighting occurred in some of these locations, as well as the robbing of phones and money (Groenendijk 2015). Outbreaks of scabies and infectious flu were reported. And after a few months, the boredom and frustration provoked drug and alcohol abuse among young Eritreans (Pharos 2016).

Forced waiting and the lack of clarity about the future became extremely frustrating. In refugee networks, stories had circulated about the relatively short waiting periods in the Netherlands, but not about the effect of the increased influx and the desire of the Dutch authorities to stop appearing more attractive than Germany. These two factors caused a considerable slowdown, from nine months up to two years, in the speed of both asylum and the family reunification procedures. After the inflow diminished and the majority of the asylum seekers went through the procedures, those still waiting were moved to better-equipped centres. In these centres, there were two to six people per room. Due to undercapacity, most asylum seekers who arrived in the Netherlands in this period moved at least five times. In 2016/2017, 98 per cent of Eritrean and 98 per cent of Syrian asylum seekers have been granted refugee status (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland 2017). Finally the frustration of not knowing has been resolved.

The second source of frustration was the prohibition of paid employment and ineligibility to attend state schools. Dutch law states that an adult asylum seeker may not study or work until he or she acquires refugee status. Authorities are worried that they would otherwise settle and integrate before they are officially admitted, so deportation would become more difficult. But the newly arrived find this absurd. "We don't like to live from government money; why can we not work and take care of ourselves?" is an often-heard statement. Beside a dislike of dependence, most people prefer to spend their time more usefully, by starting to learn Dutch and preparing for the labour market. Only after considerable pressure by volunteers, NGOs and the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid) (Engbersen et al. 2015) was language teaching permitted in the shelters.

After the first phase of waiting for the outcome of the asylum procedure, a second phase of waiting started for those who obtained refugee status, namely waiting for a municipality to provide them with a house. Those who did not obtain refugee status were moved to deportation centres, while those who received refugee status were moved to a centre for those who remain in the country. In these centres, more independence is supported. There is a two-day course on paperwork, language courses, sport, voluntary work is offered, and it is possible to shop and cook. Though there is more

activity and less boredom, the common experience of those waiting for a house is that their life is on halt again. Some move within three to five months, but in other municipalities the process is slower, and people wait more than a year in the shelters. Generally Eritreans wait longer than Syrians, because Eritreans are more often young and single and there are less smaller houses (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017). Meanwhile, married refugees, who have children below 18 outside the Netherlands, wait for family reunification.

### ***Establishing oneself in a municipality***

Life normalizes when a home becomes available. People feel freed of rules and can finally get on with their lives. The municipalities in Holland have substantial autonomy and the reception of refugees differs from one to the other. In some municipalities, refugees obtain fewer privileges, and in the mobile era these discrepancies cause anger. The refugees paint and furnish their new homes, financed with a loan that most municipalities provide, of between 500 and 5,000 euros. They may end up in an isolated rural village and have to solve a lot of practical problems. In 70 per cent of the municipalities, the Dutch Refugee Council (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland) provides support. But even if a volunteer of the Refugee Council is immediately present to assist with signing the rental contract, many other registration issues occur. Dutch bureaucracy is endless and for every step, from electricity and water to health insurance and registering one's children at a school, forms need to be filled in. In the regular procedure, refugees then begin with obligatory language and citizenship courses. Some cities' labour offices ask them to first obtain the language certificate before they give them support to find a job, but in other places, like Amsterdam, immediate working is stimulated and supported. Usually the immediate work option is appreciated more, though it can be disappointing that the options are only manual and low-paid jobs.

### **Aspirations and frustrations**

The above chronological outline does not give the impression that a nice life immediately starts after migration. But now we will look more systematically at the aforementioned aspiration categories: what came true for the refugees after 18 months to 2 years in the Netherlands?

(1) Aspirations regarding health. The life expectancy in the Netherlands is higher than in Eritrea and Syria. Refugees expect good medical facilities in the Netherlands but have mixed experiences. Of course there is access to enough clean water and potential access to medical facilities, and upon arrival a tuberculosis check is obligatory. But due to the "bed, bath and bread arrangement"

in the first phase of the asylum procedure, the coverage of care is minimal. In some of the centres there was scabies, and anything that was not urgent was not treated. Additionally, there is some mistrust towards Dutch doctors' restraint in prescribing antibiotics or heavy medicine. More serious is the vast unhappiness about the treatment of pregnant women and birth, which in the Netherlands usually takes place outside hospital.

The experiences with the health system get better and the knowledge about it improves when refugees are given a home in a municipality. The newcomers sign up for the obligatory health insurance and get access to the standard level of care. It can, however, be difficult to understand the rules, for instance which treatments are insured and affordable, and which ones not. Mulders and Tuk (2016) describe a Syrian family that visit the hospital directly and end up paying thousands of euros, because they did not know that they should have first visited the general practitioner. Information about this kind of mishap spreads fast, and avoidance of care among Syrians has been observed. The lower-educated Eritreans lack, besides knowledge about most health issues, basic knowledge about psychological problems, and are unaware of the much-needed possibilities to get psychological support. According to Pharos (2016), unrecognized depression is extremely common among them, caused by trauma and the sudden loneliness they encounter coming from a communal society. The disappointing life situation and debts add to this and stories about suicide among newcomers are startlingly common in the community, though exact data seem non-existent.

(2) Aspirations regarding food. Refugees expect a sufficient, clean and varied food supply in a rich country like the Netherlands. However, in the emergency centres for refugees, microwave meals for dinner and white bread with peanut butter, cheese, fruit and milk for breakfast and lunch were the first encounter with Dutch food habits. It is a choice that most of them did not find very appetising. In combination with depression, quite a few suffered from severe weight loss. The situation improved when they moved to shelters where they can cook for themselves and get back to eating food from their country of origin. Of course the prices for non-Dutch products are high, especially given the limitation of refugees' finances, and they are not always easy to get. Once settled in a municipality, the refugees slowly find out where to buy products that they used to buy back home, and sometimes travel to cities or have products sent by acquaintances. Though information on healthy diet is available online in Dutch and English, it usually only attracts the higher educated. Information directly from general practitioners is considered extremely important, but language is a hindrance. During the fasting periods for both Muslims and Orthodox Copts, some problems tend to occur, for instance among diabetes patients.

(3) Aspirations regarding work and income. Aspirations on the labour market are often too optimistic, and focussed on income rather than

working conditions. In the asylum phase, work is not allowed, so within the bed, bath and bread arrangement there is no income, which most people perceive as unfair. Only those who arrive with some savings, or have family that send extra money, manage more easily, though their debts can possibly grow. After acquiring refugee status, the arrangements in different municipalities vary. As said, in some smaller municipalities, refugees are advised to first fully concentrate on the language training and get their citizenship diploma before applying for jobs, whereas in for instance Amsterdam and Utrecht, they are immediately supported or even pushed into a manual job. Generally, getting a job and an income is highly appreciated and matches the aspirations of the new arrivals. It is a relief to finally take a step in the process to start earning. But the salary remaining, once after all expenditures have been paid, easily becomes a disillusion. Sending money back home is barely possible.

Educated Syrians, who speak English, and particularly those with technical training, have better chances of finding more than low-paid manual jobs, though even with a validated diploma these jobs might not be at the same level as they used to work. Eritreans often leave Eritrea before finishing high school, at the moment that national service approached, or at the moment that they were in national service. For those without a diploma, few options remain, such as a manual job (in a restaurant, as a security guard, etc.), or establishing a business, and there is a higher risk of being unemployed.

That working conditions and work hours in the country are ruled by labour law is something most refugees are not really aware of. This does not always turn out to be an advantage, since the workload and tempo are higher than they expected, and there is no time for informal contact. Of course a higher income is possible when working overtime in the irregular sector, but then this is without labour protection. The problem of not directly understanding hierarchical relations at work, which are ruled by laws, cultural norms and habits, is usually not anticipated. Reports about labour training describe Eritreans as “too shy”, not clarifying what they mean, and not as assertive, clear and direct as the Dutch (Razenberg and de Gruyter 2017).

(4) Aspirations regarding education. Most refugees expect education for their children but usually do not aspire it for themselves; they find out later, often too late, that local diplomas can make the difference in terms of advancing in the labour market. Children of asylum seekers below 18 go to school as quickly as Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA), the refugee receiving body, can arrange it, but due to the number of times they are moved from one shelter to the other, they lose a lot of time. Volunteers arrange Dutch language lessons for the adults in the shelters. Most of the adults who arrived in 2015–16 could not study in a school or university until they received their refugee status (this recently changed).

After receiving refugee status, adults younger than 30 can obtain a government loan to study, though they first have to acquire English or Dutch language proficiency. Mainly young Syrians, who were halfway through their studies before departure, take this opportunity, but the majority of refugees do not aspire to study because they think they are too old. Older Syrians often have diplomas, while the younger Eritreans nearly all need a secondary school diploma and job training to fit the Dutch labour market. In some municipalities, refugees are pressed to join a programme, since studying, job training and internships have become part of labour-market integration programmes. If this is not the case, they risk becoming long-term unemployed. After years of unemployment, the labour office exerts pressure on the unemployed to join a training programme for a specific job.

(5) Aspirations regarding justice and freedom of expression. Just like anybody else, most refugees aspire to live in freedom, in a just society, without repression and violence, and where political organization or free expression is not punished. At first sight, fair and rather common laws rule the Dutch system. However, that does not mean refugees are treated as equal to Dutch citizens. There are several more or less hidden problems that they bump into. To start with, asylum seekers have considerably fewer rights than other citizens. As we described earlier, they only have the right to a bed, a bath and bread. After refugee status is granted, the problem is not solved, since their status is not a permanent residence permit, but needs to be renewed after five years depending on the situation in the country of origin and results of the Dutch citizenship exam (Klaver 2015, 106). Klaver explains how this leads to feelings of insecurity and less willingness to build up one's life. After seven years, applying for the Dutch passport becomes possible (in 2017 this changed from five to seven years). With a Dutch passport, the possibility of staying in the country seem finally secured, though less clear forms of inequality remain, like discrimination on the labour market.

Voting in local elections is possible after five years, while voting in national elections is possible when Dutch citizenship is acquired. Inequality problems remain for those above the pension age, since the general elderly pension is based on the number of years that someone has lived in the country. Those who lived less than 50 years in the Netherlands need to apply for additional welfare money, which comes with additional restrictive rules, such as getting a fine when one does not notify the service when one is away from home. In practice this means that the general elderly pension system applies different laws for refugees than for Dutch and thus is discriminatory.

Problems remain regarding the freedom of expression about the country of origin: both Syrians and Eritreans fear the secret services.

(6) Aspirations regarding community life. According to Sen, coping with the struggles of daily life is only possible when someone is part of some kind of

community. This community can consist of people with the same language or ideological background and/or of people who are different. The optimistic aspiration of most migrants is to make many Dutch friends and become part of the Dutch-speaking community, while also having a number of good friends from their own ethnic group. However, without knowledge of English or Dutch, the first part is extremely difficult to achieve, and finding Dutch friends easily becomes one of the disillusionments of the new arrivals.

During the asylum procedure, asylum seekers mainly rely on other refugees and their compatriots, except for those lucky ones who live in a shelter where volunteers are active. Since asylum seekers are regularly moved between shelters in their first months in the Netherlands, they have to start all over again several times, or their friends have to travel. If new friendships are not (yet) strong enough, they do not last, or only last on Facebook. When refugee status and a house are finally granted, the refugees can develop a more stable group of friends around their new homes, and maybe get acquainted with their Dutch neighbours, volunteers of the Refugee Council and language teachers. As they are sometimes placed in remote villages, contacts from the first phase of their time in the Netherlands remain important. Even when friendships with Dutch people and other nationalities are formed, people's own language group remains the most significant. Whereas Eritreans usually have more language problems and are more shy and suspicious, Syrians can come up against Dutch prejudice about Muslims. Only a limited number of people seem to manage their aspiration of being part of a community that fosters real friendships and provides a meaningful social structure, and this might be a Syrian or Eritrean community. Obviously it takes a lot of time, some language proficiency, some luck and shared activities.

(7) Aspirations in relation to traditions, culture and religion. Most migrant aspirations include living at least to some extent according to their traditions, culture and religion. According to European constitutions, this is a right, but of course integrating in the destination society means adjusting to a new culture to a certain degree, at least in public life. At home people usually prefer to eat, pray and celebrate as they were used to. Among Syrians the majority is Muslim, and it is nearly always important for them to retain aspects of religion. Yet the receiving society, the Netherlands, is critical about Islam. For Syrians, gender relations are one of the worries. Parents with daughters notice that their girls learn Dutch and adopt more free habits, which they may not like (Mulders and Tuk 2016). For the Orthodox among the Eritreans, religion seems one of the most important means to cope with trauma.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have investigated how refugees arriving from Syria and Eritrea in 2015–16 have managed the first year(s) of their life in the

Netherlands. Employing the migrants' aspirations perspective has provided us with a richer insight as a starting point, compared to the integration perspective. Both perspectives lead to a conclusion that knowledge of the local language, having a job and becoming part of a local community are in the long run essential. However with the integration perspective the focus is on immigrants bad position compared to locals. The aspiration perspective adds more insight into the migrants' desires and effort, it relates to their agency, to what they have gained, and secondly it shows much more clearly why and where things go wrong, including problems caused by the receiving society.

Structural factors in the asylum system, the high number of removals, and the pre-arranged slow start with language learning and work are frustrating for them. Refugees very much aspire to work and become a full member of the local community but are not allowed to work and live isolated in refugee shelters. Even though the Syrians are often better educated and seem better prepared for life in the Netherlands, they experience many obstructions. The problems are more acute for Eritreans, who arrive young, single and uneducated, some from farming communities, used to communal life and relatively uninformed about the world. With limited chances to escape from the lowest segment of the labour market and dependent on their countrymen, it is difficult to see how they can develop in a satisfactory manner according to their own wishes. Unfortunately this is an alarming conclusion.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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