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SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF STUDIES ON ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE FIELD OF PHYSIOTHERAPY AND REHABILITATION IN TURKEY

TÜRKİYE'DE FIZYOTERAPİ VE REHABILITASYON ALANINDAKİ ETİK KONULAR ÜZERİNE YAPILAN ÇALIŞMALARIN SİSTEMATİK DERLEMESİ

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ABSTRACT

Ethical challenges in healthcare are not only universal but also context-dependent, reflecting cultural, institutional, and professional dynamics within each country. In Türkiye, ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation have attracted increasing scholarly attention; however, the available literature remains heterogeneous and fragmented. The aim of this systematic review is to synthesize national studies addressing ethical dimensions in physiotherapy and rehabilitation, including informed consent, patient rights, professional integrity, occupational rights, ethical awareness, and emerging ethical concerns related to education and technological transformation. A comprehensive search was conducted across six major databases, and eight studies meeting the predefined eligibility criteria were included in the review. The findings indicate that ethical awareness is generally higher among students and early-career professionals, yet substantial gaps persist in clinical practice, professional rights protection, and institutional support structures. Recurrent ethical challenges include inconsistencies in informed consent practices, limited formal ethics education, violations of professional and occupational rights, and difficulties in managing professional boundaries and emerging ethical risks associated with digitalization and artificial intelligence in health sciences education. Furthermore, the reviewed studies reveal considerable methodological diversity and a predominance of descriptive approaches, which constrain the depth of ethical analysis and limit critical engagement with complex ethical dilemmas. Overall, this review highlights that in Türkiye, in the field of physiotherapy and rehabilitation, ethical principles should be given greater priority during clinical practice; that the ethical problems faced by privately practicing physiotherapists are not addressed; that there is a need to strengthen institutional and legal frameworks that will safeguard ethical principles; and that a consistent, practice-oriented ethical discourse should be developed in the field.

Keywords: Ethical issues; physiotherapy; rehabilitation; patient rights; informed consent; professional ethics; occupational rights.

ÖZET

Sağlık hizmetlerinde karşılaşılan etik sorunlar yalnızca evrensel nitelik taşımakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda her ülkenin kültürel, kurumsal ve mesleki dinamiklerini yansıtan bağlamsal özellikler de göstermektedir. Türkiye’de fizyoterapi ve rehabilitasyon alanındaki etik konular son yıllarda giderek artan bir akademik ilgi görmüş olsa da, mevcut literatür heterojen ve parçalı bir yapı sergilemektedir. Bu sistematik derlemenin amacı; bilgilendirilmiş onam, hasta hakları, mesleki dürüstlük, mesleki ve özlük hakları, etik farkındalık ile eğitim ve teknolojik dönüşümle ilişkili ortaya çıkan etik sorunlar dâhil olmak üzere, fizyoterapi ve rehabilitasyon alanındaki etik boyutları ele alan ulusal çalışmaları sentezlemektir. Altı büyük veri tabanında kapsamlı bir tarama yapılmış ve önceden belirlenen uygunluk kriterlerini karşılayan sekiz çalışma derlemeye dâhil edilmiştir. Bulgular, öğrenciler ve kariyerlerinin başındaki profesyoneller arasında etik farkındalığın genel olarak daha yüksek olduğunu, ancak klinik uygulamada, mesleki hakların korunmasında ve kurumsal destek yapılarında önemli boşlukların sürdüğünü göstermektedir. Tekrarlayan etik sorunlar arasında bilgilendirilmiş onam uygulamalarındaki tutarsızlıklar, sınırlı formal etik eğitimi, mesleki ve özlük hakları ihlalleri ile dijitalleşme ve sağlık bilimleri eğitiminde yapay zekâ kullanımına bağlı olarak ortaya çıkan yeni etik risklerin ve mesleki sınırların yönetilmesindeki güçlükler yer almaktadır. Ayrıca incelenen çalışmalar, etik analizlerin derinliğini sınırlayan ve karmaşık etik ikilemlerle eleştirel düzeyde etkileşimi kısıtlayan belirgin bir metodolojik çeşitlilik ve betimleyici yaklaşımların baskınlığını ortaya koymaktadır. Genel olarak bu derleme, Türkiye’de fizyoterapi ve rehabilitasyon alanında; etik ilkelere daha fazla öncelik verilmesi gerektiğini, özel çalışan fizyoterapistlerin karşılaştığı etik problemlere değinilmediğini, etik ilkeleri güvence altına alacak kurumsal ve yasal çerçevelerin güçlendirilmesine ihtiyaç duyulduğunu ve meslek içinde tutarlı, uygulama odaklı bir etik söylemin geliştirilmesi gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Etik sorunlar; fizyoterapi; rehabilitasyon; hasta hakları; bilgilendirilmiş onam; meslek etiği; iş hakları.

INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy and rehabilitation is a profession that focuses on human movement and function; aims to promote health, prevent disease, and maximize physical potential; supports the physical, psychological, and social well-being of individuals; and continuously evolves through evidence-based practices. Given its direct and sustained interaction with individuals, families, and communities, the profession is inherently grounded in ethical principles such as respect for patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, justice, and equitable access to care (1). Accordingly, ethics constitutes a fundamental component of both physiotherapy education and clinical practice, requiring practitioners to demonstrate ethical sensitivity, professional integrity, and accountability. These expectations are also reflected in international professional frameworks, such as the ethical guidelines of World Physiotherapy, which emphasize patient-centered care, professional integrity, accountability, and respect for human rights in physiotherapy practice.

In daily practice, physiotherapists encounter a wide range of ethical challenges related to clinical decision-making, including maintaining professional boundaries, safeguarding patient rights, managing conflicts of interest, ensuring fair use of resources, and navigating responsibilities within interdisciplinary healthcare teams. These challenges are further shaped by institutional structures, working conditions, regulatory frameworks, and sociocultural contexts. Moreover, evolving healthcare systems, increasing workload, occupational pressures, and the integration of digital technologies into education and practice add new layers of ethical complexity to the profession (2).

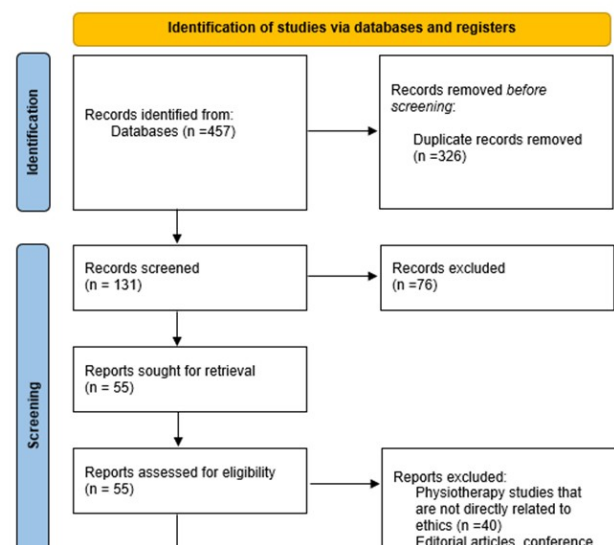
In Türkiye, ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation have attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. Existing studies have addressed diverse themes such as informed consent in physiotherapy practice, ethical awareness and attitudes among students and professionals, perceptions of unethical behaviors in healthcare settings, professional and occupational rights, and emerging ethical concerns associated with technology use and educational transformation (3). Despite this increasing interest, the literature remains fragmented, with considerable

variation in study populations, methodological approaches, and thematic focus. While some studies primarily examine ethical awareness and attitudes, others emphasize structural and institutional challenges, including inadequate ethics education, insufficient legal protection, and inconsistencies in clinical implementation. Focusing exclusively on studies conducted in Türkiye is methodologically justified by the country-specific legal, educational, and professional contexts that shape ethical practice in physiotherapy and rehabilitation. The structure of physiotherapy education, the scope of professional responsibilities, and the regulatory frameworks governing clinical practice and professional rights vary across national settings. In Türkiye, differences in ethics education, institutional support mechanisms, and the implementation of patient rights legislation create a distinct ethical context. Therefore, synthesizing national studies allows for a context-sensitive understanding of ethical challenges and provides a relevant basis for informing education, professional practice, and policy development within the field.

To date, however, no systematic review has comprehensively examined the scope, thematic distribution, and methodological characteristics of studies conducted in Türkiye on ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a coherent understanding of the profession's ethical environment and for providing a solid foundation for educational strategies, professional regulations, and policy initiatives. Therefore, the aim of this systematic review is to synthesize peer-reviewed articles and theses conducted in Türkiye that address ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation, identify recurring ethical concerns, highlight gaps in the existing literature, and contribute to future developments in ethics education, professional practice, and institutional policy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The review process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines, and the study selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).



Review Issue

The review question was developed using the PICOS framework (Participants, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Study design) (P- Physiotherapists, physiotherapy students, and rehabilitation professionals in Turkey. I- Studies addressing ethical education, ethical practices, or exposure to ethical dilemmas in clinical or academic settings. C- Where applicable, studies compare ethical awareness across different education levels, institutions, or experience levels. O- Ethical awareness, responses to ethical challenges, and the impact of ethics training. S- Peer-reviewed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies conducted in Türkiye.)

Search Approach

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across six major databases: DergiPark, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, YÖK Thesis Center, and Google Scholar. The search included both Turkish and English keywords such as: “fizyoterapi,” “rehabilitasyon,” “etik,” “etik sorunlar,” “hasta hakları,” “bilgilendirilmiş onam,” “mesleki etik,” “mahremiyet,” “çıkarcı çatışması,” and their English equivalents: “physiotherapy,” “rehabilitation,” “ethics,” “ethical issues,” “patient rights,” “informed consent,” “professional ethics,” “confidentiality,” “conflict of interest,” and “Türkiye”. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals or academic theses focusing on ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation within the Turkish context were included without date restriction.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they were conducted in Türkiye, focused on the field of physiotherapy and rehabilitation, and addressed ethical issues either directly or indirectly. Eligible sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles and academic theses published in Turkish or English. Studies were excluded if they did not address ethics, were published in languages other than Turkish or English, or were editorials or conference abstracts.

Selection of Studies

The study selection process involved two stages. Initially, research articles identified through the literature search were screened based on their titles and abstracts using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Subsequently, the full texts of the remaining articles were assessed to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the systematic review.

Evaluation of Methodological Accuracy

In this systematic review, the methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using an adapted version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, which is appropriate for qualitative, quantitative descriptive, and mixed-method research designs. A total of eight studies addressing ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation within the Turkish context were evaluated. Each study was appraised according to ten CASP criteria: clarity of research aims, appropriateness of methodology, justification of study design, recruitment strategy, transparency of data collection procedures, consideration of researcher reflexivity, attention to ethical issues, rigor of data analysis, clarity of findings, and overall contribution to the field (Table 1).

The assessment showed that all included studies clearly articulated their research aims and employed methodologies consistent with their stated objectives (3,4,11). Most studies provided sufficient descriptions of data collection procedures and demonstrated acceptable rigor in data analysis, particularly those employing structured questionnaires or qualitative interview approaches (5-8). However, methodological limitations were observed in relation to reflexivity; only a limited number of studies explicitly discussed the role of the researcher, potential biases, or the influence of positionality on data interpretation (7).

Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, respect for participants, and ethical approval, were generally addressed across the included studies (3,11), although the depth of ethical reflection varied. Overall, the methodological quality of the reviewed studies can be considered moderate to satisfactory. While the studies offer valuable insights into ethical awareness, professional challenges, and institutional conditions in physiotherapy practice and education in Türkiye, greater attention to reflexivity and transparent reporting of methodological limitations would strengthen future research in this field (7,4). While no studies were excluded based on the CASP appraisal, the identified methodological limitations—particularly the predominance of descriptive designs and limited attention to reflexivity—were taken into account during

the synthesis and interpretation of findings, leading to a more cautious interpretation of recurring ethical themes.

Characteristics of Included Studies

The eight studies included in this review examined a broad range of ethical issues related to physiotherapy and rehabilitation practice and education in Türkiye. The studies were published between 2005 and 2025 and reflected diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including physiotherapy, health sciences education, and health policy. While not all studies were conducted exclusively by physiotherapists, all addressed ethical dimensions that are directly relevant to physiotherapy education, professional practice, or working conditions.

Gard et al. (2005) conducted a cross-national comparative survey involving physiotherapy students from Türkiye and Sweden to examine differences in ethical viewpoints and moral reasoning. Using a standardized ethics attitude scale, the study demonstrated that Turkish students tended to prioritize respect, authority, and social harmony, whereas Swedish students emphasized autonomy and justice. Although the study focused primarily on ethical attitudes in education rather than clinical practice, it provided valuable insight into how cultural context shapes ethical awareness among future physiotherapists.

Korkmaz and Uzunes (2019) carried out a cross-sectional survey among undergraduate students from multiple health sciences departments, including physiotherapy and rehabilitation. The study explored perceptions of unethical behaviors in academic and clinical settings, focusing on issues such as confidentiality breaches, discrimination, and respect toward patients and colleagues. The findings indicated that violations of privacy and unequal treatment were commonly perceived ethical concerns, underscoring the importance of structured ethics education within physiotherapy training programs.

Taşvuran Horata (2021) investigated the attitudes of practicing physiotherapists and physiotherapy academicians toward the physiotherapy profession in Türkiye. Using a descriptive survey design, the study examined professional identity, perceptions of professional value, and working conditions. Although ethical issues were not the sole focus, the findings provided indirect insight into professional integrity, responsibility, and the ethical dimensions of professional satisfaction and commitment.

Ceylan and Yağcı Şentürk (2022) examined professional awareness levels among associate degree

physiotherapy technician program students. This cross-sectional study assessed students' understanding of professional roles, responsibilities, and expectations. While not explicitly framed as an ethics study, the findings contributed to the ethical discourse by highlighting gaps in professional awareness that may influence ethical decision-making in clinical practice.

Seçer and Özer Kaya (2024) conducted a cross-sectional study investigating technostress levels and awareness of artificial intelligence use in health among physiotherapy and rehabilitation students. The study addressed emerging ethical challenges related to digitalization, technology adoption, and educational preparedness. Although focused on technostress, the results raised important ethical considerations regarding data use, professional competence, and the responsible integration of technology into physiotherapy education.

Gülhan Güner et al. (2025) employed a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives and experiences of health sciences academics regarding the use of ChatGPT and artificial intelligence tools in education. Through semi-structured interviews, the study examined ethical concerns such as academic integrity, responsibility, transparency, and the potential impact of AI on professional education. The findings were particularly relevant to physiotherapy education, where ethical decision-making increasingly intersects with digital technologies.

Edisan and Aksoy (2005) focused directly on ethical practice by examining informed consent in physiotherapy applications. This study analyzed ethical principles related to patient autonomy, information disclosure, and consent processes within rehabilitation contexts. As one of the earliest studies addressing ethics in physiotherapy practice in Turkey, it provided a foundational perspective on informed consent as a core ethical obligation for physiotherapists.

Finally, Çalışgan (2023) investigated the need for specific occupational health and safety legislation in physiotherapy through a survey based on the clinical experiences of physiotherapists in Turkey. The study highlighted ethical concerns related to working conditions, professional rights, occupational risks, and institutional responsibility. These findings emphasized the ethical implications of inadequate legal protection and the importance of policy frameworks to support ethical practice in physiotherapy.

Synthesis and Interpretation

When synthesized collectively, the included studies portray an emerging but uneven body of literature

addressing ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Türkiye. The studies vary considerably in terms of research focus, participant groups, and methodological approaches, reflecting the early developmental stage of ethics-related scholarship within the field. Ethical concerns are examined across educational, professional, and institutional contexts, yet the literature does not converge around a single dominant framework or research tradition.

A notable characteristic of the reviewed studies is the predominance of descriptive and cross-sectional designs. Most investigations focus on ethical awareness, attitudes, or perceptions among students, early-career professionals, or mixed health sciences populations, rather than on the lived ethical experiences of practicing physiotherapists in clinical settings. As a result, the existing evidence provides a broad overview of ethical sensitivity and perceived challenges but offers limited insight into how ethical dilemmas are navigated in routine physiotherapy practice.

Across the studies, several recurring ethical domains can be identified, including informed consent, professional responsibility, ethical awareness, occupational conditions, and emerging concerns related to technology use in education and practice. These domains are addressed with varying depth and emphasis, contributing to a fragmented yet thematically consistent picture of the ethical landscape. While some studies focus on foundational ethical principles, others extend the discussion to professional identity, working conditions, and institutional responsibilities.

Taken together, the findings suggest that ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Turkey are increasingly recognized across multiple levels of professional formation and practice. However, the diversity of study designs, populations, and ethical focal points limits direct comparison and synthesis across studies. The reviewed literature therefore represents an important descriptive foundation, capturing the scope and direction of ethical inquiry in the field, while highlighting the current boundaries of empirical evidence without extending into interpretive or evaluative conclusions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review indicate that ethical awareness within physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Türkiye is gradually developing; however, it remains limited in terms of methodological diversity and profession-led empirical inquiry. Across the included studies, core ethical concepts such as patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality,

professional responsibility, and occupational rights were recurrently addressed (3,4,5,6,10). However, these issues were predominantly examined through descriptive, cross-sectional, or conceptual approaches rather than through in-depth empirical investigation. This pattern suggests that ethical awareness alone may be insufficient to ensure ethically competent practice without stronger methodological rigor and institutional support mechanisms.

When considered within established ethical frameworks, the ethical issues identified across the reviewed studies can be broadly situated within core principles such as respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Challenges related to informed consent, patient rights, and confidentiality primarily reflect concerns regarding patient autonomy and non-maleficence, while issues surrounding professional responsibility, occupational rights, and working conditions are closely associated with principles of justice and beneficence. Although the reviewed studies did not explicitly frame their findings within formal ethical theories or professional codes, this alignment suggests that the ethical challenges observed in physiotherapy and rehabilitation practice in Türkiye are consistent with widely recognized ethical principles in healthcare and professional ethics.

Within the Turkish context, ethical scholarship in physiotherapy appears to be at an early formative stage. A considerable proportion of the included studies focused on students, early-career professionals, or interdisciplinary populations rather than on practicing physiotherapists themselves (4,5,8,9). While this trend reflects an increasing recognition of ethical challenges during professional formation, it also indicates a reliance on perspectives originating outside the core of physiotherapy practice. Strengthening physiotherapist-led research—particularly through qualitative, reflective, and practice-based methodologies—may be essential for developing a more profession-centered ethical discourse in Türkiye.

The limited representation of ethical challenges encountered in routine clinical physiotherapy practice may be attributed to several contextual and structural factors. In Türkiye, institutional constraints, high clinical workloads, and limited protected time for research may reduce opportunities for practicing physiotherapists to engage in empirical ethics research. In addition, research culture within clinical settings may prioritize technical or outcome-oriented studies over reflective or ethics-focused inquiries. Ethical issues experienced in daily practice may also be perceived as sensitive, normalized, or difficult to articulate within

formal research frameworks, further contributing to their underrepresentation in the literature.

Cultural and institutional factors emerged as significant influences on ethical reasoning and professional attitudes. The cross-cultural comparison conducted by Gard et al. highlighted how collective values, social harmony, and respect for authority shape ethical perceptions among Turkish physiotherapy students, in contrast to models that prioritize individual autonomy (4). Ethical principles, however, should be addressed within a universal framework that transcends cultural and contextual differences.

Another prominent theme identified in this review concerns professional and institutional conditions that shape ethical practice. Studies addressing professional attitudes, working environments, and occupational health and safety revealed ethical challenges related to inadequate institutional support, insufficient legal protection, and unclear professional boundaries (6,10). These findings suggest that ethical practice in physiotherapy is closely linked to organizational structures and policy frameworks. They also indicate that individual ethical awareness needs to be supported by systemic and regulatory measures in order to be effectively reflected in daily practice.

Emerging ethical challenges associated with digitalization and technology use were also evident in the included literature. Studies examining technostress, artificial intelligence, and digital tools in health sciences education raised concerns related to data responsibility, transparency, professional competence, and academic integrity (7,8). As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in physiotherapy education and practice, addressing these ethical dimensions through formal guidelines and educational integration appears necessary to safeguard patient rights and professional accountability.

Overall, the current body of literature reflects both progress and fragmentation in the ethical development of physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Türkiye. Ethical sensitivity appears to be increasing particularly at the level of students and early-career professionals, largely through formal education and theoretical exposure. However, at the level of clinical practice, the absence of a coherent and practice-oriented ethical framework limits the translation of ethical knowledge into consistent professional behavior. Advancing ethical practice in Turkish physiotherapy therefore requires not only strengthening ethics education but also greater profession-led engagement, methodologically robust

empirical research, and the integration of ethics into institutional policies and professional regulation.

The persistence of ethical gaps identified in the reviewed studies appears to be closely linked to structural and educational factors rather than to individual ethical awareness alone. Although ethical sensitivity is relatively high among students and early-career professionals, the findings suggest that ethics education often remains theoretical and is insufficiently integrated into clinical decision-making processes. In addition, limited institutional support, unclear professional boundaries, and inadequate legal and regulatory mechanisms may hinder the consistent application of ethical principles in daily practice. As a result, ethical challenges such as inconsistencies in informed consent practices, violations of professional rights, and difficulties in managing professional responsibilities continue to emerge despite growing awareness of ethical standards.

Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach that extends beyond individual responsibility. At the educational level, ethics training should be strengthened through practice-oriented and case-based learning strategies that reflect real clinical dilemmas and emerging issues related to digitalization and technological transformation. At the institutional level, the development of clear ethical guidelines, supportive organizational cultures, and accessible mechanisms for ethical consultation may facilitate ethical decision-making in clinical settings. From a policy perspective, reinforcing legal and regulatory frameworks that protect professional and occupational rights and align ethical standards with national healthcare structures could contribute to more sustainable and consistent ethical practice in physiotherapy and rehabilitation.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, the relatively small number of studies directly addressing ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Türkiye limits the overall scope of the synthesis. Second, heterogeneity in study designs and methodological quality across the included studies made it difficult to apply a fully consistent quality appraisal framework. In addition, a potential publication bias toward descriptive or education-focused studies may have influenced the scope and nature of the available evidence. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

CONCLUSION

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ/ RESEARCH ARTICLE

This systematic review provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on ethical issues in physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Türkiye. The findings indicate a growing awareness of ethical principles among students, educators, and professionals; however, the existing literature remains fragmented, methodologically limited, and largely descriptive. Ethical topics such as informed consent, professional responsibility, occupational rights, and emerging challenges related to digitalization are increasingly recognized, yet they are not sufficiently examined through practice-based or profession-led empirical research.

Overall, the evidence suggests that ethical development in Turkish physiotherapy is still at an early and transitional stage. To strengthen ethical practice and professional accountability, future efforts should focus on integrating structured ethics education grounded in universal ethical principles into physiotherapy curricula, encouraging physiotherapist-led research, and supporting institutional and regulatory frameworks that ensure these principles are consistently applied in clinical practice. In this context, future research would benefit particularly from qualitative, practice-based studies exploring ethical dilemmas encountered by practicing physiotherapists in real clinical settings, as well as from intervention-based research evaluating the effectiveness of ethics education programs and ethics-focused training initiatives. Advancing ethical scholarship in this manner may contribute to more reflective, patient-centered, and ethically grounded physiotherapy services in Türkiye.

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