

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Maria Anastasova Semerdjieva, MD

Dean of the Faculty of Public Health, Medical University – Plovdiv

Member of the Scientific Jury according to Order No. P-109-319/24.07.2025 for a dissertation submitted for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor."

Professional field: 7.4. "Public Health"; Doctoral program "Health Care Management"

Author: Dora Georgieva Vasileva

Form of doctoral studies: part-time doctoral student at the Department of Nursing, Sliven Branch of the Medical University "Prof. Dr. P. Stoyanov" – Varna

On the topic: "INDEPENDENT NURSING PRACTICE – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES"

Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Anna Petrova Georgieva, PhD

GENERAL PRESENTATION OF THE PROCEDURE AND THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

The submitted set of materials on an electronic medium complies with the requirements for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" according to the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDAS) and the Regulations of the Medical University – Varna.

Dora Georgieva Vasileva graduated in 1984 from College for health specialists "Dr. N. Nikolaev" – Varna, specializing as a "Pediatric Nurse." From 1995 to 2001, she completed a Bachelor's degree in "Health Management" at Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" – Varna, Faculty of Public Health. She further enhanced her qualifications with two master's degrees: "Human Resource Management" (Economic University – Varna, 2001–2002) and "Health Care Management" (MU – Varna, 2009–2010).

Dora Vasileva has extensive professional experience in nursing and healthcare management. From 1992 to 2018, she worked at UMDHAT "St. Marina" JSC – Varna, in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit as a head nurse. Since 2017, she has been the head nurse of the Pediatric Surgery Department at MPHACT "St. Anna" Varna JSC.

Since 2018, she is the manager of "The Sisters" Ltd., an outpatient group practice for nursing care in Varna, responsible for planning, organizing, and developing the practice's activities.

Throughout the years, she has actively participated in numerous national and international trainings, courses, and conferences aimed at improving the quality of nursing care, patient safety, and the development of nursing practice. She has been a mentor for nursing students under the "Student Practices – Phase 1" project of the Ministry of Education and Science. She participated in international conferences and courses organized by EWMA (2020) – European Wound Management Association; ISPAD (2015, 2017) – International Society for Pediatric and Adolescent Diabetes; Aesculap AG, Germany (2013–2016) – programs for infection prevention, infusion therapy safety, and disinfection; American Heart Association (2013) – Pediatric Advanced Life Support (PALS); Health Foundation, London (2006) – Problem-based learning for health improvement.

She has completed numerous specialized courses organized by the Bulgarian Association of Health Professionals related to critical conditions in children; wound care nursing; hospital hygiene and infection prevention; professional skills and inspiration from historical practices; quality nursing care and behavior in critically ill patients.

She masters Russian at a very good level and English at a good level.

RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Modern health systems worldwide face increasing needs for more efficient resource use and delivery of accessible, quality, and timely healthcare. In this context, independent nursing practice has established itself as an important factor for increasing efficiency and accessibility of health services, especially in conditions of physician shortages, aging populations, and rising chronic disease prevalence.

The establishment of the autonomous role of the nurse aligns with global trends to expand the authority of healthcare professionals. This allows nurses to provide counseling, prevention, monitoring, and therapeutic activities within their competence, alleviating physician workload and improving overall patient care.

The right of nurses to register and open practices where they carry out independent activities is regulated in Bulgaria by amendments to the Health Act (2020). However, independent nursing practice as a form of freelance or private activity

remains underdeveloped. This is due to challenges such as the lack of a clear financing mechanism, insufficient public awareness, unclear regulations regarding interaction with the health insurance system, and limited opportunities for professional autonomy. In the face of global demographic and health challenges – such as aging populations, increasing chronic diseases, and medical personnel shortages – independent nursing practice emerges as a key tool for expanding healthcare access, improving prevention, and optimizing resources. Considering opportunities and challenges in independent nursing practice is essential for developing modern healthcare models, strengthening the nurse's role, and improving population health outcomes.

CHARACTERISTICS AND EVALUATION OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation contains 204 pages, illustrated with 55 figures, 6 tables, and 4 appendices. The structural organization includes: used abbreviations; introduction; chapter one – literature review (65 pages); chapter two – aim, objectives, materials and methods of the study (15 pages); chapter three – results and discussion (48 pages); chapter four – innovative practical approaches to overcoming challenges faced by nurses providing care in independent nursing practices (25 pages); conclusions, proposals, contributions, summary (9 pages); literature and appendices (42 pages). The dissertation's structure logically and meaningfully presents the doctoral candidate's research intentions. The well-detailed contents provide a clear overview and facilitate understanding.

The dissertation starts with an introduction emphasizing the importance of the chosen topic and the need for its exploration. The literature review is structured according to the dissertation concept and uses 201 sources (109 in Cyrillic and 92 in Latin scripts). The cited materials are contemporary and relevant.

The literature review covers the emergence, development, and current state of independent nursing practice as a response to the growing need for accessible and quality healthcare. A novel approach is the initial examination of international experience with independent nursing practices, followed by the situation in Bulgaria. This allows assessment and comparison with countries having longer traditions in this model of care, revealing main mechanisms for its establishment and practical and regulatory challenges facing Bulgaria in adapting and developing independent nursing practice. The comparative analysis highlights best practices and effective models

elsewhere while critically evaluating gaps in Bulgarian scientific literature and studies on this care model.

The doctoral candidate demonstrates strong ability to identify challenges faced by nurses in independent practice and key gaps in available literature, showcasing deep knowledge and analytical approach relative to the contemporary social and health reality.

The dissertation's aims and objectives are clearly formulated and aligned with the research problem's relevance. The hypotheses, subject, object, and units of observation are adequately defined and consistent with the research goal.

The study organization is described with high precision, detailing methodological approach, sampling, tools used, and sequence of data collection and analysis. This methodological clarity ensures objectivity and reproducibility of the research.

For achieving the research aims, complementary methods are used: documentary analysis of literature, normative documents, and other texts; two sociological methods with developed survey tools including patient and nurse questionnaires and semi-structured expert nurse interviews.

750 respondents participated, distributed as follows:

- 350 patients receiving nursing care in inpatient and outpatient settings;
- 350 nurses from hospital and outpatient structures;
- 50 experts – nurses practicing independently.

The study covers 4 multidisciplinary hospitals, 5 diagnostic-consultative centers, and 8 medical centers across Sliven, Varna, Shumen, and Veliko Tarnovo. Expert interviews covered all 22 existing individual or group nursing care outpatient clinics, ensuring reliability and representativeness.

Appropriate statistical methods were applied for primary data processing, revealing significant relationships between main factors and outcome variables, enabling sound conclusions.

The methodological rationale, correctness, and professionalism in the research execution are highly appreciated, emphasizing the scientific value of the dissertation. The "Results and Discussion" section presents the core scientific work. Numerous results are obtained, analyzed, systematized, and illustrated with tables and figures. Analysis of patient needs for nursing care in independent practices reveals significant potential to improve access and quality of services, along with multiple challenges. Key

patient expectations include individualized care, accessibility, continuity, and trust in nursing staff competence.

This highlights the role, preparation, and attitudes of nurses as key factors in successful independent practice functioning. Many nurses indicate need for additional professional support, regulatory clarity, and training. Postgraduate education is essential to prepare nurses for independent practice challenges, covering clinical skills, management, legal frameworks, finance, and patient communication.

Chapter four presents innovative practical approaches to overcoming major challenges in nursing care in independent practices. This part stands out as highly significant, encapsulating the dissertation's applied contributions with potential for real implementation in Bulgaria's health system.

Proposed innovations include a unified electronic system for nursing documentation, a model consent form, a training program, and an algorithm for establishing nursing care clinics. These are outcomes of thorough normative and stakeholder attitude analysis, demonstrating orientation towards sustainability, integration, and efficiency within modern public health.

The applied research section is thus a valuable contribution with scientific and practical potential, supporting modernization and development of nursing in Bulgaria.

The conclusions drawn confirm the need for comprehensive support and regulatory improvement of independent nursing practice in Bulgaria. Key findings include:

- Identification of main difficulties such as lack of stable financing, inadequate awareness, and absence of unified documentation system;
- Comparative legislative analysis revealing lack of uniform regulation, financing, and reporting approaches, calling for legal updates;
- Recognition by all participants (nurses, patients, experts) of the important role of independent nurses in providing accessible, quality, holistic care;
- Positive patient attitudes towards receiving care from independent nurses and experts' call for further postgraduate training;
- Need for introducing innovative approaches for planning, monitoring, evaluation, and financing nursing activities, with expert support for proposed innovations' feasibility and efficacy.

Recommendations are addressed to the Ministry of Health, Bulgarian Association of Health Professionals, and Medical Universities. These could enhance legal and

professional frameworks and improve quality, accessibility, and sustainability of nursing care.

The contributions clearly demonstrate scientific value and practical applicability, providing foundation for policies, education, and development of nursing practice in Bulgaria.

ABSTRACT AND PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION

The abstract meets requirements and reflects main results. Two scientific articles related to the dissertation have been published and presented at scientific forums.

CONCLUSION

Doctoral candidate Dora Vasileva presents a deeply developed theoretical and empirical dissertation characterized by strong scientific grounding, responsibility, and consistency. The topic is undoubtedly relevant with clear scientific importance, contribution, and high practical applicability of its conclusions and recommendations.

The study impresses with precise methodology choice, correct statistical data treatment, and strict adherence to procedural and ethical standards. Dr. Vasileva demonstrates excellent preparation, mastery of theoretical foundations, and independence, critical thinking, and professionalism throughout the research.

The dissertation is written in clear, logical, and scientifically sound language, facilitating understanding of the ideas and results.

Based on the above, I consider the work fully meets the criteria for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" and recommend to the honorable Scientific Jury to award Dora Vasileva the degree "Doctor" under the doctoral program "Health Care Management," professional field 7.4. "Public Health."

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Reviewed

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/Prof. Dr. M. Semerdjieva, MD/