

## OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Katerina Valentinova Akabalieva, MD, PhD  
on the submitted dissertation

### **“Follow-up of Constant and Variable Characteristics in the Active Phase and Remission in Adolescent Patients with Anorexia Nervosa”**

by Dr. Gabriela Valentinova Gacheva

For the acquisition of the scientific and educational degree **“Doctor”**

in the scientific specialty **“Child psychiatry”**, professional field 7.1 **“Medicine”**, education  
field 7 **“Health Care and Sport”**

I present this opinion in my capacity as a member of the Scientific Jury, appointed by Order No. R-109-497 / 02.12.2025 of the Rector of the Medical University – Varna, based on a decision recorded in Protocol No. 50 / 24.11.2025 of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Medicine and a report with incoming No. 103-8315 / 01.12.2025 for the preparation of an opinion on Dr. Gabriela Valentinova Gacheva – a full-time PhD candidate in the PhD program **“Child Psychiatry.”**

For the preparation of this opinion, I was provided with one copy each of the dissertation, the dissertation summary, a curriculum vitae, a list of publications, and all other required documents. The scientific supervisor of the PhD candidate is Prof. Petar Petrov, MD, PhD, DSc, Head of the Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology at the Medical University – Varna and a member of the Scientific Jury.

Dr. Gabriela Gacheva holds a Master’s degree in Medicine (2019) and acquired a specialty in Child Psychiatry in 2025. She worked as an assistant professor at the Clinic of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at St. Marina University Hospital for the period 2020–2025 and is currently a lecturer in the same specialty there. She is a member of national and international scientific organizations and has participated in specialized scientific forums. Dr. Gabriela Gacheva is the author of two publications in specialized national journals on eating disorders, which corresponds to the topic of the dissertation.

The topic of the dissertation is particularly relevant due to the insufficient number of studies in the scientific literature related to the identification of constant and variable psychological

characteristics in adolescent patients with anorexia nervosa, which would contribute to the establishment of individualized therapeutic strategies in the follow-up of this patient group.

The dissertation submitted for evaluation meets the requirements set out in the Academic Staff Development Act and its Implementing Regulations. The dissertation comprises 142 typed pages and is structured into seven chapters, 31 tables, and 3 figures and 2 graphics, which are further explained in the text, with specific statistical analyses presented for data processing. The bibliography of the dissertation cites 454 literary sources, of which five are in Cyrillic and 449 are in Latin.

**The literature review** is structured into ten main thematic areas and constitutes 50% of the dissertation. The etiopathogenesis of anorexia nervosa is presented in depth, including its neuroanatomical and psychological constructs. Risk factors for anorexia nervosa are analyzed, encompassing biological, psychological, social, and demographic determinants in light of contemporary scientific evidence. The methodological difficulty in studying risk factors is clearly emphasized, related to the predominance of retrospective studies and the limited availability of prospective and longitudinal research designs. The variety of diagnostic tools for anorexia nervosa used in the literature is noted, with an emphasis on distinguishing their diagnostic, screening, and monitoring functions. The importance of a combined approach, incorporating standardized instruments and clinical interviews, is highlighted, and the strengths and limitations of self-report and clinician-rated methods are discussed. The literature review is written in clear and precise language and style, demonstrating the author's ability to present scientific literature within the defined problem area. Special attention and high appraisal are deserved for the comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of the discussed issues, as well as the author's ability to synthesize extensive scientific information.

**The objectives** of the dissertation are clearly defined, scientifically grounded, and aligned with current issues in child and adolescent psychiatry, focusing on the follow-up and analysis of psychological characteristics in adolescents with anorexia nervosa in different phases of the disorder—active phase and remission—through the use of a standardized instrument (EDI-3), as well as on the clinical applicability of the results in long-term psychotherapeutic work.

**The tasks** derived from the stated objectives are feasible and clearly formulated in three main points, correspond to the research aim, and contribute to its achievement.

**Subject and object of the study:** These are presented accurately, in clear and precise language, and include adolescent patients diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, followed in the active phase and in remission, meeting the diagnostic criteria for the disorder according to DSM-5 and ICD-10. The study sample comprises 47 participants, divided into two groups—27 patients in the acute phase of the disorder and 18 patients in remission—allowing for a dynamic analysis of psychological characteristics over time.

**Instruments:** A valid and reliable self-report instrument, the EDI-3, is used, which is among the most widely used tools in clinical and research work on eating disorders. In addition to assessing symptomatology, it identifies psychological and personality constructs that remain stable even during clinical remission. The self-report nature of the EDI-3 may represent a potential limitation of the study, as patients with anorexia nervosa, particularly in the active phase, may deny some symptoms and have defensive mechanisms that can affect the reliability of self-reported data. Nevertheless, within the context of the dissertation, the self-report format remains appropriate, as the focus is on examining subjectively experienced emotional and personality characteristics.

**The organization, timing, and setting of the study** for both groups are described accurately and comprehensively and fully comply with the requirements for scientific research.

**The research methodology** is appropriate to the stated objectives. The follow-up of patients with anorexia nervosa in the active phase and in remission allows for an analysis of the dynamics of symptoms and psychological characteristics over time, which represents a significant strength of the study.

**The statistical methods** used (t-test, ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and Stepwise regression) are appropriately selected for the aims of the study. The application of descriptive statistics is suitable and necessary for the initial characterization of the demographic and clinical parameters of the sample. Correlation and regression analyses are informative and useful; however, they should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. The choice of the t-test and ANOVA is logical for comparing the two groups—patients in the active phase and those in remission from anorexia nervosa. Given the limited sample size, the potentially non-normal distribution between the two groups (active phase and remission), and their partial overlap, supplementing the statistical analysis with non-parametric analyses of the EDI-3 could enhance the interpretative value of the results.

**The results** presented in the PhD candidate's work and their discussion are carried out with precision, supported by extensive tabular presentation, and demonstrate the researcher's ability to work competently with the collected data, to report them accurately, and to interpret the findings in depth.

**The conclusions** are seven and are appropriate, logically substantiated, and consistent with the available statistical data. They combine quantitative results from correlation and regression analyses with clinical interpretation, enabling the formulation of specific recommendations for therapeutic work and patient monitoring. Scales related to body image, ineffectiveness, and general psychological maladjustment demonstrate sensitivity to therapeutic change and may serve as indicators of treatment progress. In contrast, indicators such as emotional dysregulation and overcontrol remain stable and show high predictive value for BMI, highlighting the importance of long-term psychological support.

**The main contributions** of the dissertation include the identification of sensitive indicators for treatment monitoring—specifically, which EDI-3 scales and composites clearly reflect changes between the acute phase and remission and which remain stable. Thus, the results provide concrete guidance for focusing interventions on both physical recovery and the psychological and social aspects of the patient.

**Conclusion:** Based on the above, I give a positive evaluation of the submitted dissertation *"Follow-up of Constant and Variable Characteristics in the Active Phase and Remission in Adolescent Patients with Anorexia Nervosa"* and recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury vote in favor of awarding the educational and scientific degree **"Doctor" (PhD)** to Assistant Professor Dr. Gabriela Valentinova Gacheva in the scientific specialty **"Child psychiatry"**, professional field 7.1 **"Medicine"**, education field 7 **"Health Care and Sport."**

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Review

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/Assoc. Prof. Katerina Akabalieva, MD, PhD/