

STATEMENT

From Prof. Dr. Albena Kerekovska, MD, Ph.D.
Department of Social Medicine and Healthcare Organization
Faculty of Public Health, Medical University - Varna

Subject: Dissertation work for obtaining the educational and scientific degree
"DOCTOR"

in the field of higher education 7. *"Health and sport"*
professional field 7.1. *"Medicine"*
scientific specialty *"Hygiene (including occupational, communal, school, radiation, etc.)"*

of **Ekaterina Ivanova Valtcheva, MD**
PhD student in full-time education

Topic of the dissertation:
"Early Childhood Development: Features and Prevention of Disorders"

Research Supervisor:
Prof. Teodora Dimitrova, MD, Ph.D.

According to Order № P-109-193 from 28.04.2022 of the Rector of the Medical University – Varna I was elected a member of the Scientific Jury, and according to Protocol №1 from 04.05.2022 I have been appointed to prepare an opinion on the procedure for acquiring for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" with candidate Dr. Ekaterina Ivanova Valtcheva - PhD student in full-time education in the Doctoral Program "Hygiene, incl. occupational, communal, school, radiation, etc." at the Department of Hygiene and Epidemiology, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University - Varna.

Details of the procedure

The procedure for developing and presenting the dissertation and the doctoral program fully complies with the regulations.

According to Order of the Rector of the Medical University - Varna № P-109-49/01.02.2019 Dr. Ekaterina Valtcheva is enrolled as a PhD student in full-time education in the doctoral program "Hygiene, incl., occupational, communal, school, radiation, etc." She successfully passed the PhD minimum exam. Based on a decision of the Department Council from 18.04.2022 of the Department of Hygiene and Epidemiology on the readiness for public protection and decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Public Health (Protocol № 184/20.04.2022) Dr. Valtcheva was credited with the right to protection by Order № R-109-193/28.04.2022 of the Rector of the Medical University - Varna.

All administrative documents on the procedure provided for in the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Medical University - Varna are presented.

Biographical data and the career development of the PhD student

Dr. Ekaterina Valtcheva graduated from the V-th Language High School - Varna with advanced language training in English with a gold medal for excellent achievement in 1988. In 1996 acquired a master's degree in Medicine at the Medical University - Varna. In 2002 Dr. Valtcheva acquired the medical specialty "Children's Diseases" in 2021 - "Hygiene of children and adolescents".

Dr. Valtcheva began her career in 1997 as a resident doctor at the Mother and Child Medical and Social Care Home in Varna. Gains many years of professional experience both in hospital pediatric care (in University Hospital "St. Marina", Varna and Specialized Hospital for Obstetrics and Gynecology "Prof. Dr. D. Stamatov" - Varna) and in outpatient specialized pediatric practice, which determines the interest in problems related to early childhood development, and gives it a solid foundation for the development of the dissertation. In the period 2011-2016 Dr. Valtcheva is a part-time lecturer in the Department of Hygiene, Disaster Medicine and Epidemiology and in the Department of Preclinical and Clinical Sciences at MU - Varna, and since 2017 and is currently a full-time assistant professor in the Department of Hygiene and Epidemiology. Participates in the teaching of the disciplines "Disaster Medicine", "Hygiene of Children and Adolescents", "Hygiene and Ecology" (English language training); Pediatrics; "Clinical Homeopathy" and "Initial Course in Homeopathic Therapy". She is a co-author of 4 textbooks. From 2017 and is currently a lecturer at the European School of Clinical Homeopathy. In the period 2004-2006 is a part-time PhD student of Health management at the Academy of Labor and Social Relations in Moscow, Russia, and since 2019 is enrolled as a PhD student in full-time education at the Department of Hygiene and Epidemiology at MU - Varna.

She has conducted a number of trainings and short-term specializations in the country and abroad. Participates in 6 scientific and educational projects. She is the an idea holder of "The Green Sea Yard of Varna" Project, and since 2018 she has been its leader.

She has a good foreign language background - speaks and uses English and Russian fluently in her teaching and research.

Structure and content of the dissertation

The dissertation is presented in a total volume of 232 pages. Its structure is logically constructed and includes: Introduction; Literature review; Purpose; Tasks; Material; Methods and Tools; Results; Discussion; Conclusions; Conclusions and recommendations; Contributions; Publications and Participations, as well as 11 Appendices and Bibliography with the used sources.

The scientific development and its results are well illustrated with 5 tables and 91 figures. The dissertation contains 281 literary sources, duly cited in the presentation. The used modern sources illustrate a very good literary awareness and up-to-date information of the author in the field of the researched problem.

Relevance of the topic

The topic of the dissertation covers a relevant and significant public health and social problem in the context of the perceived fundamental importance of early childhood development for physical, mental and social well-being throughout life and quality of life in modern society.

The study focuses on the importance of early childhood development for the parent community in Bulgaria and the resulting needs for knowledge, practices, competencies and

opportunities for prevention of disorders in order to increase parental competence and health promotion in early childhood.

For the first time in our country, parents' perceptions of the importance of the period of early childhood development are thoroughly researched and analyzed, as well as parental awareness, competencies and attitudes for seeking support and interaction with a specialist. In this sense, the dissertation is unique for the country in the field of the problem under consideration, with significant theoretical-cognitive and practical-applied contributions of original nature and fills a gap in this field of scientific knowledge. Knowledge of the attitudes of the parent community about the importance of early childhood development is essential for the implementation of policies to promote health and justify specific preventive interventions - at the individual and population level.

I evaluate the dissertation as topical and dissertable.

Evaluation of the literature review

The literary review is purposeful, thorough and well structured. A wide and up-to-date awareness of the PhD student was demonstrated, as well as the ability to critically evaluate, summarize, systematize, bring out unresolved and significant issues, in-depth analysis and interpretation of scientific literature in the field.

A historical overview of the observations of child development and their theorizing from antiquity to the present is presented. The changes in the attitude towards the child, the development of the knowledge about the early childhood development and the significance of the different periods in early childhood are traced.

The modern global concepts and scientific theses of the 21st century related to early childhood development, as well as the national dimensions of the understanding of the importance of ECD in the 20th and the first two decades of the 21st century are traced in development.

The main demographic processes in Bulgaria and current trends in Bulgarian society, directly affecting the nuclear family and child development, are presented.

The importance of the family in the development and upbringing of the child and the leading role of the parents is emphasized. Special emphasis is placed on parental competence (cognitive, functional, social, metacompetence) - definition, nature and development. It is presented through the model of the multidimensional holistic framework of five main systems of competencies - for stimulating care, early education, protection, nutrition and health care.

Good knowledge of the literature has served as a basis for deriving research problems.

Purpose and tasks

The aim of the present paper is clearly and precisely defined, justified by the literature review and the unsolved problems identified in the literature review. There are six main tasks aimed at achieving the main goal. They are logically consistent and fully cover the problem.

Methodology

The methodology is complex, described in detail and corresponds to the set tasks. Documentary, sociological (qualitative and quantitative) and statistical methods for data processing and analysis of results are applied.

The qualitative sociological method "Participant Observation" with interpretive analysis was carried out by the PhD student in the community of "The Green Sea Yard of Varna" - a space for early socialization and prevention of children from 0 to 3 years and 11 months. The

results served as a basis for developing the tools (author's questionnaire) for the subsequent quantitative sociological survey - a direct individual online survey with respondents parents of children from 0 to 4 years, recruited by the voluntary response sampling and the snowball sampling. The applied statistical methods are selected appropriately according to the required dependencies. This guarantees the reliability of the results of their own research and the correct conclusion of scientific research, which is a very good testament to the research capabilities of the PhD student.

Results of own research

The results of own research and their discussion are comprehensively presented in Section VII "Results" of the dissertation and structured according to the tasks. First, the results of the qualitative sociological survey "Participant Observation" in the community of "The Green Sea Yard of Varna" are presented. The observation was carried using the AEIOU framework (monitoring and analysis of the five key elements - actions, environment, interactions, object, users) and Empathy Map, adapted in 6 areas to identify the importance of early childhood development for the parent community. The results of the interpretive analysis of the qualitative research are summarized and become the basis for the development of the tools (author's questionnaire) of the subsequent quantitative research.

The central focus of the quantitative research (survey) are parental competencies, literacy, awareness, behavior, trust and quality of life of the child. The specific parental behaviors and priorities in early childhood development in terms of stimulating care, protection, proper nutrition, health care, incentives, risk awareness and early education are clearly outlined. The most common parental competence among the Bulgarian community is stimulating care, and last – early learning.

Particularly valuable are the results on parental attitudes for seeking and using support from a parent-child-specialist axis, complemented by an assessment of the importance of certain aspects of the parent-specialist relationship.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions are clearly formulated, derive from the results obtained and correspond to the set research objectives. Emphasis is placed on the need to develop competencies on the parent-child-specialist axis to meet the real needs of each child in the period of early childhood development. The importance of education, defining competencies, attitudes and practices for early childhood development, as a crossroads of all conceptual frameworks and stakeholders, is highlighted. The need for the formation of specific national policies to promote basic public awareness of the importance of early childhood development was emphasized.

The concluding part presents recommendations for health promotion and prevention in early childhood and increasing parental competence - specifically aimed at six groups of recipients - parents (nuclear family); extended family; future parents; specialists; non-specialists involved in the cause of early childhood development and the public.

Contributions to the dissertation

The work has theoretical-cognitive and practical-applied contributions, which are mainly of an original nature. I accept all the contributions formulated by the author - 13 with original and 4 - with confirmatory character. They reflect the originality, significance and applicability of the developed work and the results obtained.

Evaluation of the abstract

The abstract is well structured, prepared according to the requirements and in a synthesized form fully reflects the content of the dissertation. A list of three full-text publications related to the topic of the dissertation has been added to it.

Publications on the topic of the dissertation

In connection with the dissertation, 3 full-text publications were presented, 2 of which in Bulgarian scientific journals and one in a collection of papers from a scientific conference. In all publications the dissertation is the first author in the author's team, which proves her personal participation in the research. In addition, in section XII of the dissertation, 4 participations in scientific-practical conferences are mentioned, one of which is at an international forum.

Conclusion

The presented dissertation is on a topical and significant topic, filled with complex methodology; provides new knowledge and includes theoretical and applied contributions of original and confirmatory nature. It is the first in-depth study in our country on early childhood development - features and prevention of disorders, laying the foundations for a study of the parent community in Bulgaria in this aspect.

The dissertation reflects the very good theoretical preparation and practical experience of the author in the research field, mastery of the subject and skills for independent research.

The dissertation fully covers the requirements of the Law for the Development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its application and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Medical University - Varna.

The mentioned merits of the dissertation give me a reason for a positive assessment and to convincingly propose the award of Dr. Ekaterina Ivanova Valtcheva educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education "7. Healthcare and sports", professional field "7.1. Medicine", in the scientific specialty "Hygiene, incl. occupational, communal, school, radiation, etc. ".

18.05.2022
Varna

Scientific jury member:
/ Prof. Albena Kerekovska, MD, PhD/

