

OPINION

From Assoc. Prof. Lyubomira Dragomirova Koeva-Dimitrova, Ph.D.

Head of the Department of Economics and Management of Healthcare, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna

Appointed with Order No. R-109-480/16.11.2023 as a member of the Scientific Jury for the procedure of acquiring the educational and scientific degree

"Doctor (PhD)"

in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional direction 3.7. Administration and Management, scientific specialty "Organization and Management outside the Sphere of Material Production (in Healthcare)"

by SVETLANA KRASTEVA PANAYOTOVA

PhD Thesis:

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE UTILIZATION OF HEALTH SERVICES IN BULGARIA

Scientific supervisor:

Assoc. Prof. Elka Atanasova, Ph.D.

1. General Presentation of the Procedure

The review of the submitted documents shows that the procedure for the dismissal of the doctoral student have been followed. The documents and provided materials are prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation, and the Regulations for the conditions and order for acquiring scientific degrees and taking academic positions at the Medical University - Varna. The main materials presented by the doctoral student include: a dissertation; an abstract in Bulgarian and English, with a corresponding report on the contributions in the dissertation; a list and copies of four independent full-text publications on the dissertation; a declaration of originality, etc.

2. General Presentation of the Doctoral Candidate

Svetlana Panayotova has a master's degree in Health Management from 2001. She has completed a number of additional courses and trainings, as well as specialization in health economics. She has 12 years of professional experience in marketing, sales, and commercial representation in the healthcare sector. She worked for eight years as an expert in international cooperation at MU-Varna. Since 2019, she has been an honorary assistant, and after winning a competition in 2020, she became an assistant at the Department of Economics and Management of Healthcare, MU-Varna, and leads exercises in 9 economic disciplines. The feedback received from the regular survey of student opinion on her work shows that she is a highly valued and beloved teacher by her students. My personal impressions are that besides being an

excellent teacher, Svetlana Panayotova is an exceptionally responsible, precise, positive, and communicative colleague, with great creative, scientific-research, and academic potential.

3. General Presentation and Evaluation of the Dissertation

The dissertation "Factors Influencing the Utilization of Health Services in Bulgaria" is developed in a total volume of 207 pages. It consists of an introduction, four chapters, conclusion, bibliography, and appendices. It contains 29 tables, 27 figures, and 159 correctly cited literary sources, of which 42 are in Bulgarian and 117 in English.

3.1. Topicality and Significance of the Dissertation

The study of the utilization of health services is particularly topical and significant, in the context of an aging population and increasing frequency of chronic diseases. This necessitates a reassessment of healthcare needs and access. Global health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the importance of the flexibility and adaptability of health systems. Additionally, the rapid development of medical technologies changes consumption and utilization models of health services, requiring new approaches in health management and policies. Hence, dissertations seeking contemporary solutions and alternatives in this area deserve special attention and admiration. The reliable assessment of the utilization of health services, identifying the influencing factors, plays a key role in creating and implementing health programs and policies, enabling more accurate forecasting and management of the consumption of health services and associated costs. The noted lack of research analyzing the determinants of health service consumption, applying a specific model for studying the factors influencing utilization in Bulgaria, unequivocally shows the ripe need for more in-depth research on this issue.

I believe that the current dissertation, subject to evaluation by the Scientific Jury, represents a completed scientific work with a serious theoretical and applied contribution, filling the gap in similar scientific developments in our country.

3.2. Structure and Content of the Dissertation

The presentation of the dissertation is structured in logical sequence, with an appropriately selected and applied methodological toolkit, which allows for the correct study of the defined scientific problem in theoretical and theoretical-applied aspects, ensuring accuracy and validity of the results. The object of study is the utilization of health services by the population in Bulgaria, with utilization being considered in two aspects: as entry into contact with the Bulgarian health system; as the number of services used by individuals over a certain period. The utilization of the following three main types of health services is studied: examination by a General Practitioner (GP); examination by a specialist (with and without referral); hospital treatment. The subject of the study is the factors influencing the utilization of health services, the direction, and degree of their influence.

The aim is clearly defined, and the accomplishment of the set tasks leads to the achievement of the goal.

A combined research approach is used, applying qualitative and quantitative research methods. An extensive literature review, a sociological survey among citizens, and statistical analysis of the data have been carried out.

Some limitations in the study are noted in the dissertation: not all types of health services are covered; limited period of study; the sample is not representative of the general population; dependence on self-reported data; lack of analysis of interactions between different factors influencing utilization.

In Chapter One, the doctoral candidate demonstrates extensive and in-depth knowledge on the issues related to the main concepts, approaches, concepts, and models for studying the utilization in the health sector. She shows remarkable analytical skills and convincingly argues the choice of Andersen's Behavioral Model as the most relevant for studying the utilization of health services in Bulgaria, mainly due to its comprehensiveness, complexity, flexibility, and applicability in various contexts, including adaptation to the Bulgarian context.

In summary, the First Chapter presents an in-depth theoretical analysis of the utilization of health services. It should be highlighted the thorough review of various theoretical approaches and the careful, well-argued choice of Andersen's Behavioral Model as the framework for the study. This chapter successfully lays the groundwork for subsequent analyses, which is essential for the overall quality of the dissertation. It is distinguished by clarity, structure, and the substantiation of the presentation, representing a significant contribution to understanding the complex topic of health service utilization.

Chapter Two presents a detailed and multidisciplinary analysis of the contextual characteristics influencing the utilization of health services in Bulgaria. The scope of the analysis includes a wide range of factors, such as demographics, socio-economic conditions, health policies, and financing, allowing understanding of the influencing factors in different dimensions. The inclusion of the consequences of COVID-19 adds current relevance and practical significance to the study, examining how the pandemic has affected utilization and access to healthcare. The analysis of health policies and the financial structure of the health system provides valuable information for strategic planning and reforms in the sector.

In summary, Chapter Two is extremely important for understanding the complex relationship between socio-economic, demographic, and political factors and their impact on the utilization of health services. It offers a deep understanding of various influencing factors and lays the foundations for developing future strategies for improving health services in Bulgaria.

Chapter Three of the dissertation focuses on analyzing the individual characteristics that affect the utilization of health services, examining the relationship between health behavior and the various aspects of the Behavioral Model. The results of a sociological survey conducted among health service users are presented, covering the period during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reveals significant barriers to access to health services. The analysis also shows that personal health practices and socio-economic factors are essential for the utilization of health services. It should be noted that thanks to the well-presented and illustrated results of the statistical analyses, it is easy to trace the dependencies of the various variables and their impact on the utilization of health services.

In summary, Chapter Three successfully identifies key demographic groups and their specific needs and preferences for health services. The diversity of well-chosen and used statistical methods and analyses provides a comprehensive picture of the impact of different factors. Different aspects of the Behavioral Model are effectively linked to the utilization of health services.

I believe that Chapter Three deserves a high evaluation, as it offers an in-depth and systematic analysis of the individual factors influencing the utilization of health services, supported by extensive data and analyses. The good structure, comprehensiveness of the analysis, and the strong connection with the theoretical model should be emphasized.

Chapter Four presents the conclusions from the analyses conducted within the dissertation and discusses their significance. This part of the dissertation focuses on a detailed examination of the results in the context of the existing literature and Andersen's Behavioral Model.

This chapter is extremely valuable for summarizing the main conclusions of the study and for providing guidelines for future research. The data from the author's own studies are successfully integrated with the accepted models, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the factors influencing the utilization of health services in Bulgaria. Particularly important and useful are the recommendations formulated by the doctoral candidate for future research application of the Behavioral Model. These recommendations can aid in making decisions to improve health services and policies in our country. Additionally, the inclusion of the impact of COVID-19 in the study and subsequent analyses further contributes to the topicality and relevance of the dissertation.

In conclusion, the fourth chapter of the dissertation is extensive, well-structured, provides valuable conclusions and recommendations, and makes an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of health service utilization in Bulgaria, offering specific guidelines for future research.

In the final part of the dissertation, the main aspects and findings of the conducted research are compactly and clearly presented. The extensive topics and methods used in the study are successfully summarized. The conclusion is highly informative, well-structured in logical sequence, and successfully synthesizes the diverse aspects of the scientific research.

4. Evaluation of the Contributions

I fully accept the contributions formulated by the doctoral candidate. They reflect her exceptionally serious and in-depth scientific research work.

I can summarize that the theoretical contributions are related to the extremely significant and thorough theoretical analysis of the different models and concepts associated with the utilization of health services, thereby enriching the academic discourse and providing a valuable reference for future research. The systematization of theoretical approaches contributes to the depth and scope of the study, increasing its scientific value.

The theoretical-applied contributions are related to the analysis of contextual factors, with the addition of the epidemic situation, representing an innovative contribution. This expands the

applicability of the Behavioral Model and enriches the understandings of the influence of external factors on health behavior.

The development of a methodological toolkit for studying individual factors is also a valuable contribution, facilitating future application of the model in the context of Bulgarian healthcare.

The conducted statistical analyses and studies of individual factors unequivocally demonstrate the practical significance of the dissertation. They provide specific data and understanding of the consumption of health services in our country.

The application of the Behavioral Model in the context of Bulgarian healthcare is a significant scientific contribution, increasing the possibilities for conducting international comparative analyses and knowledge exchange.

The recommendations formulated based on the study represent a practical guide for the application of the model in Bulgarian research and developments, by various interested parties and organizations. This can significantly improve the understanding of effective management of Bulgarian healthcare.

The research provides evidence that can be used for making informed decisions in the field of health policy, aimed at increasing access to and the quality of health services in the country.

5. Evaluation of the Publications on the Dissertation

The doctoral candidate has four publications in Bulgarian related to the topic of the dissertation, which shows consistency and advancement in her scientific work.

6. Evaluation of the Abstract

The presented abstract (in Bulgarian and English), with a volume of 45 standard pages, concisely and reliably reflects the content of the dissertation and highlights the important aspects in it.

7. Conclusion and Proposal

Thus, the presented dissertation makes a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics and determinants of the utilization of health services in Bulgaria. It offers valuable content and guidelines for the practical implementation of health policies and strategies, focusing on consumer behavior and the systemic factors that shape it.

The scientific work developed by Svetlana Panayotova is impressive both in its completeness and its methodological rigor and practical significance. The doctoral candidate demonstrates high professionalism and diligence in scientific activity, strong commitment to the researched topic, and attention to academic standards. She successfully combines theoretical knowledge with skills for practical applicability, reaching valuable insights and making useful recommendations for the Bulgarian health system.

The overall impression of this dissertation is that it adds significant value to the field of health research and deserves a high evaluation for its academic contribution, originality, and practical applicability.

In conclusion, considering all of the above, I confidently give my positive vote of the dissertation on the topic "Factors Influencing the Utilization of Health Services in Bulgaria" and propose to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to award Svetlana Krasteva Panayotova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in PN 3.7. Administration and Management, in the specialty "Organization and Management outside the Sphere of Material Production (in Healthcare)".

18.01.2024
City of Varna

Member of the Scientific Jury:
(Assoc. Prof. Lyubomira Koeva, Ph.D.)

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