



**REVIEW**  
**FROM**  
**PROF. PLAMEN DIMITROV, MD, PHD**

Member of the Scientific Jury in the procedure of dissertation work defense on the topic:

**HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL HARMS OF ALCOHOL USE BY OTHERS ON  
YOUNG PEOPLE IN BULGARIA**

for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the doctoral program “Social Medicine and Health Management””

with doctoral candidate **MIRELA RUMENOVA STRANDZHEVA**

On the basis of Order №.RD-22/15.01.01.2024 of the Director of the National Center of Public Health and Analyses and by decision of the Scientific Council (Protocol №. 30/11.01.2024) I was elected as a member of the Scientific Jury according to the specified procedure and was assigned the task of presenting a review.

The review was prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Terms and Conditions for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at the National Center of Public Health and Analyses (NCPHA).

**1. General overview of the procedure and the PhD candidate**

In accordance with the procedure, a set of documents in paper and in electronic form, were provided to me, containing the required documents, including the following: dissertation work; abstract; copies of scientific publications; list of publications and participation in scientific forums; and other documents.

Mirela RumenoVA Strandzheva was assigned as a doctoral student of individual training under the Order of the Director of NCPHA, № RD-325, effective from 10.06.2022, for the postgraduate program “Social Medicine and Health Management”. The doctoral student possesses the required number of points, according to Appendix 1. Minimum national requirements for scientific and teaching activities.

At a Scientific meeting of the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate, and based on a decision of the Scientific Council, the postgraduate student was permitted with the right of dissertation work defense, according to Order № RD-19/12.01.2024 of the Director of the National Center of Public Health and Analyses.

The set of documents is in accordance with the requirements. The submitted documents prove the legitimacy and the completeness of the conducted training and the procedure for its administration.

## **2. Autobiographical information of the candidate**

Mirela Strandzheva was born on May 24, 1986. In 2005, she graduated from English Language High School, Plovdiv. In May 2008 she graduated with a BA in Psychology from Richmond American University in London and in 2009 with a MSc in Health Psychology from City University, London. In 2010, she acquired a qualification as a psychological consultant (in cognitive behavioral therapy) at the Institute of Ecology of Thinking in Sofia, and in 2014 - a qualification for NCDs prevention in Austria.

Her work experience began in a neurological office at the University Multiprofile Medical Hospital for Active Treatment "St. Georgi" in Plovdiv. Afterwards, she worked as an assistant at the "Psychological diagnostics, prevention and counselling" and "Psychological management and crises" sectors at the Institute of Psychology with the Ministry of the Interior. In the period 2010-2013, she was a professional human resources management consultant. Since February 2014, she is assigned as an expert in the Department of Behavioral Risk Factors and Prevention of NCDs within the Directorate Health Promotion and Disease Prevention of the National Center of Public Health and Analyses. Since 2023, she has been appointed as the Head of the Department of Prevention of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases at the same directorate.

She participates in the implementation of national and international programs. She is a member of project under the European Union health-related programs - CHRODIS (Joint Action on Chronic Diseases and Promoting Healthy Aging across the Life Cycle), CHRODIS PLUS, RARHA (Joint Action on Reducing Alcohol Related Harm), CanCon (Joint Action on Cancer Control), IPAAC (Innovative Partnership for Action Against Cancer), ADVANTAGE (Joint Action on Frailty). Member of expert networks - EurohealthNet, International Association of National Public Health Institutes (IANPHI), Monitoring Framework of the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-Being for All (SDG 3 GAP ), Regulations for alcohol trade in Bulgaria in line with the European Centre for Monitoring of Alcohol Marketing. Member of the British Psychological Society – Graduate Membership.

She holds additional specializations and trainings: Economics of Chronic Diseases (EConDa ) Workshop, 05.10.2015, Public Health Modelling, UK Health Forum (Economics of Chronic Disease); Behavioural Risk Factors Leading to The Development of NCDs and Health Promotion, 28.09. – 01.10.2015, NCPHA; Practical Training for SPSS for Statistical Data

Processing in The Field of Public Health, 17.08. – 19.08.2015, NCPHA; Integrated NCD Surveillance . CINDI Policy Academy, 22.04.2015, Kaunas, Lithuania (Integrated monitoring of NCDs); Prevention of Violence Against Children, 19.11. – 20.11.2014, NCPHA, State Child Protection Agency; Passive Smoking and Health Risk in Preschool Age, 03.12. – 04.12.2014; Supervision of CBT, Prof. Paul Salkovskis , University of Bath, 06.05.2010.

She is fluent in spoken and written English and has a good level of Russian language. She has four awards: “Outstanding Graduate in Psychology Award” 2008, Richmond American University in London; 2006, 2007, 2008 – excellent academic achievements (Dean’s List for Outstanding Academic Achievement).

### **3. Relevance of the dissertation topic**

Alcohol consumption, and especially alcohol abuse, is one of the manifestations of an unhealthy lifestyle and is a problem for most countries in the world, including Bulgaria. Along with its addiction characteristics, alcohol use may result into different mental, neurological, and somatic disorders and is a risk factor for various socially significant diseases leading to disability and premature death.

The public health field considers alcohol-related harms not only in terms of alcohol dependent people, but also in terms of the cumulative negative consequences that include the person who consumes alcohol, the people around him and the society as a whole.

The chosen topic of the dissertation work is relevant and significant from a scientific and practical point of view, given that alcohol consumption is a social, economic and health challenge affecting not only the individuals who consume alcohol, but also the people around them and the society in general.

#### **Characteristics of the dissertation work**

The dissertation work is designed according to the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. The text is clear, well-structured and there is an adequate balance between the specific sections.

The work developed is presented in 187 pages and includes all required elements: introduction, literature review, research methodology, discussion of results, conclusions, recommendations. The bibliography consists of 79 literature sources, of which 13 are in Cyrillic and 66 are in Latin. The work is illustrated with 44 tables, 30 figures and 2 appendices.

#### *Literature review*

The literature review is presented in 60 pages and demonstrates the current trends on issues related to alcohol consumption. Presented are topics on prevalence, morbidity and mortality of alcohol use, its impact on individual level and on people around the ones that

consume alcohol. Types of harms to others are examined in the context of the National Survey on Risk Factors for Population's Health in Bulgaria 2020, as well as among young people who are more likely to exhibit episodes of excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Emphasis is placed on the social harm and negative consequences associated with harm to the well-being and health of people around alcohol users. As the PhD student observes, one of the reasons is rooted in social changes over the past decades – a response to alcohol abstinence at the beginning of the last century, as well as to the change in the privacy boundaries as alcohol consumption was perceived as a topic of a personal nature.

A conceptual framework for the impact of alcohol consumption on other people is also presented – main interactions with family, friends, colleagues, strangers, etc.

The analysis in the literature review indicates the excellent awareness of the PhD student regarding the researched problem, which deserves a high-level evaluation. Mirela Strandzheva knows how to work with scientific literature, to discuss different opinions, and to make general conclusions.

The qualitative and well-structured literature review is the basis for the formulation of *the objective*: “To investigate the prevalence of health and psychosocial harms of other people's alcohol consumption among young population, with a view to developing guidelines for the prevention of alcohol abuse”. Indicated are five tasks, a thesis and three hypotheses.

#### *Research methodology*

The object of the study is young university population in Bulgaria. The study consists of two stages: results from the National Survey on Risk Factors for Population's Health in Bulgaria 2020 and individual survey conducted in the period May-June 2023.

Adequate sociological methods were used to achieve the stated objective: a *documentary method* - documents of the WHO, EC, OECD, Ministry of the Interior, literary sources, etc. were studied; a *standardized individual interview* - data from National Survey from 2020; a *survey method* through a web-based questionnaire, including adapted sections from the established questionnaire of the WHO/ThaiHealth Project Protocol “The Harm to Others from Drinking”, Version 1, which examines in detail respondents' experiences, related to the harm of alcohol use to other people. The sample was randomly assigned by completion of the questionnaire sent by e-mail to the students. The questionnaire itself includes three sections: demographic characteristics; questions about the assessment of harm caused by the consumption of alcohol of other people; the damage caused by close people in the sphere of social relationships; and ten harms from a close person, with a direct effect on the psychological state of the interviewee.

Data processing was performed using the statistical software product SPSS. Alternative, correlation and graphic analysis, as well as descriptive and evaluation methods were used in the data analysis section: descriptive statistics - frequency analysis and graphic images; Chi-square test method; Mann-Whitney method; t-test for independence; ordinal logistic regression analysis; multinomial logistic regression analysis.

*Results, conclusions and recommendations, contributions*

The study provides data on the prevalence and severity of harm from alcohol use to others among the surveyed students, which shifts the focus of individual responsibility to a social and public perspective. Gender, marital status, and religious affiliation are identified as defining demographic characteristics in the perception of the effects of alcohol. Twenty-two harms from known and unknown people were investigated and their prevalence among the young population was identified.

Individual's alcohol consumption is an important focus in determining the factors that make the probability of experiencing harm caused by other people's alcohol consumption more likely. An interesting result is that students who drink less often or who are abstainers are more likely not to report alcohol-related harm, which raises further questions about the possible relationship between the overall negative impact of alcohol and the tendency to report harm.

Regular alcohol consumption on a weekly basis associates with the largest number of harms among all the studied ones (offenses, problems with friend(s)/neighbour(s), family problems/partnership difficulties, emotional harm/neglect and negative impact during a social event). They can be experienced both in different contexts and in different forms, which gives rise to the need to develop a unified model to address them in future studies.

The dissertation ends with the formulation of *conclusions*, which act as a logical step following the set tasks and objectives, as well as the overall dissertation work. The obtained results are crucial for the public health field, contributing to the expansion of the spectrum of influence of alcohol not only on the consumers' level, but also on the people around them.

Guidelines for limiting alcohol use and reducing the harms cause to people other than the drinkers are defined. They can act as a basis for the development of strategies and normative documents by competent authorities at both national and regional level.

*Personal participation of the author*

The author was personally involved in all stages of the study - planning, design, management, coordination and data collection monitoring, analysis and processing. The dissertation work demonstrates that Mirela Strandzheva has in-depth knowledge, professional

and personal qualities to independently carry out research activities. The thesis is written in a stylistically good manner, providing a complete picture of the completed work.

The *theoretical analysis* of the harms caused by alcohol consumption on others than the drinker with a focus on young people and the developed specific guidelines to deal with the challenges at both national and regional level have a scientific and theoretical contribution.

The *scientific and applied contributions* are the following: the validated for the first time in Bulgaria a methodological tool for studying harms of alcohol use on other people; the analysis of health and psychosocial harms; the developed methodology can be used to conduct future research among the population, as well as in the development of initiatives, interventions and strategies at regional and national level.

*In connection with the dissertation work, the PhD student has 5 published articles and scientific reports from participation on scientific forums.*

#### *Dissertation Summary*

The dissertation summary reflects entirely the achievements of the PhD student, synthesizes the content of the dissertation work and it is fully compliant with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Terms and Conditions for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at NCPHA.

#### *Recommendations*

- Given the importance of the topic and the results of the study, I recommend a further step in developing a monograph that will be useful to medical and non-medical professionals.
- The results of the dissertation work to be presented at scientific forums and published.

### **CONCLUSION**

I positively evaluate the presented dissertation work. The reason behind my assessment is the relevance of the problem and the absence of comparable studies in the country, the up-to-date methodical approach applied, the large number of precisely performed and analyzed research work. The dissertation is distinguished by scientific integrity and it practically orientated. It bears a potential for ideas for future research, which increases its significance.

The dissertation complies entirely with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Terms and Conditions for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at NCPHA to be given the award of the scientific degree “Doctor” in “Social Medicine and Health Management”.

The above considerations act as the reason to confidently propose to the members of the honorable scientific jury to evaluate highly the dissertation work and to vote positively for awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” to Mirela Rumenova Strandzheva.

14/02/2024

Prepared by:

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