

## OPINION

**by Assoc. Dr. Natashka Danova, MD**  
**on the dissertation work on the topic “Health and psychosocial harms of alcohol use by others on young people in Bulgaria”**  
**for the award of a scientific degree “doctor”**  
**to Mirela Rumenoza Strandzheva**

Problems related to alcohol consumption are among the highest public health priorities and a serious risk to human health and well-being.

The topic of the dissertation work is an issue of current concern and is significant from a scientific and practical point of view. The study is focused on the importance and prevalence of health and psychosocial harms of alcohol consumption by others on the young population in Bulgaria. The problem is extremely relevant not only because of the widespread and growing prevalence of alcohol use, but also because of the health and psychosocial harms on the people around those who consume alcohol.

The dissertation work is presented in 187 pages and is designed according to the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. The text has clear wording, is well-structured and there is an adequate balance between the different sections: introduction, literature review, research methodology, analysis, conclusion with recommendations and main guidelines, bibliography and 2 appendices. The work is richly illustrated with 30 figures and 44 tables.

In the introduction, the significance of the problem for the field of public health is demonstrated, considering a new understudied aspect - the influence of alcohol use on people around those who drink alcohol as well as the types of harms caused. As the PhD student highlights, as early as 2009, the WHO defined alcohol harm to others as a priority programme area, which is also reflected in the Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol 2010. The need to study the overall effect of alcohol is justified, specifically the most vulnerable groups - the young population.

The literature review presents data on the prevalence of alcohol consumption globally and in Bulgaria. A special place is devoted to the health risks from it, as well as to the impact of alcohol consumption to others. The theoretical analysis shows the excellent awareness of the PhD student on the problem and also bears a clear scientific and theoretical contribution. The need to conduct such a research project is justified.

Chapter two describes the methodology and organization of the study. The survey toolkit is well-selected and adapted for use within the Bulgarian population. Data from the National Survey of Health Risk Factors among the Population in the Republic of Bulgaria, conducted in 2020, was used. An individual study on the harms of alcohol to others was carried out, using a web-based questionnaire, including adapted sections from the established questionnaire from the WHO/ThaiHealth Protocol Project – “The Harm to Others from Drinking”, Version 1.

The objective and the tasks are clearly formulated; a thesis and three working

hypotheses are presented. The aim is to investigate the prevalence of health and psychosocial harms of alcohol consumption by others on the young population, with a view to develop guidelines for the prevention of alcohol use. The defined tasks are 5 and they are logically derived from the goal. The object of the research is the young population aged 19-25 years - 405 students from universities in Bulgaria. Adequate methods were used - documentary, sociological (survey and interview) and statistical.

In the third section, an analysis of the results of the representative National Survey of Health Risk Factors conducted in 2020 within the framework of the National Program for the Prevention of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NCCPD) is carried out. High level of alcohol use among the Bulgarian population was established, confirming the need for more efforts to limit alcohol consumption.

Theoretical and practical contributions are made by the in-depth analysis in the fourth section of three areas of harm: related to aggression, violence and misbehavior caused by a known or unknown person, where offences are the harms with the highest prevalence rate; harms in scope of social relationships from close people of the respondent, where situations of harassment and anxiety are the most common harms; and the third area of harms examines the experiences related to social relations and the psychological state of the respondent caused by the use of alcohol of a close person, where situations of avoiding seeing that person because of their alcohol consumption are most common.

The results show that the use of alcohol among the students in the study is widespread, and 66.5% of them reported experiencing harm. Students who drink less frequently and those who abstain are more likely to report no alcohol-related harm. Gender, marital status, and religious affiliation are identified as defining demographic characteristics in the perception of the effects of alcohol. Consequences regarding social relations are the most commonly experienced harms among students.

As a result of the analyzes, the PhD student has formulated conclusions that logically follow the analysis and discussion of the results and confirm the defined thesis and hypotheses, and also has developed specific guidelines for both national and regional level in relation to limit the harm caused by alcohol consumption to other people.

In conclusion, Mirela Strandzheva emphasizes the necessity to frame the negative effect of alcohol to others in order to reduce the rooted perception of alcohol consumption as a normal behavior and not as an important risk factor for physical and mental health.

The bibliography includes 79 up-to-date sources, of which 15 are in Cyrillic.

The work is technically well-presented. The results of the study contribute to the development of effective measures for the prevention of alcohol abuse.

Presented are 5 publications in scientific journals related to the problem, in one of which Mirela Strandzheva is an independent author.

#### **Contributions:**

While the harms to the health of those who drink alcohol are well-established, significantly fewer studies describe the social harm and negative consequences associated with harms to the well-being and health of those around them. This is the first study on this issue in

the country. The latest WHO report on alcohol emphasizes the need not to limit alcohol as a risk factor for the drinker, but also to consider it from the perspective of “harms to others”. In this regard, the development has a valuable scientific and theoretical contribution.

It is of scientific and applied importance to monitor the trends of high-level alcohol use, as well as the approaches in the implementation of various policies, which stand as major components in national programmes and strategies. Despite the need for further research, the study confirms a wide range of harms and their severity, which deserves high appraisal.

The young population in Bulgaria is one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of alcohol use. This signals the need for urgent actions and a greater emphasis on prevention. Research on the harms of alcohol use by others is essential from the perspective of individual and public health.

The content and the quality of the dissertation summary meet the requirements and reflect in detail the content and the main results achieved in the dissertation.

The development is distinguished by expertise and conscientiousness. The personal involvement of the PhD student is indisputable and the formulated contributions and obtained results are attributed to her. The PhD student has taken into account the recommendations made during the internal defense procedure of her work.

**Conclusion:**

The dissertation comprehensively illustrates the problem of alcohol use and the harm it causes to the people around the drinker. It indicates that Mirela Strandzheva knows the issue thoroughly and because of her extensive professional experience in this field, she has the necessary knowledge, professional and personal qualities to independently carry out scientific research, to comprehensively investigate and interpret literature data and her own studies' datasets. The study can serve as a theoretical basis for further scientific research. The development has a scientifically- and practically-oriented.

I believe that the PhD student successfully tackled the pre-defined objective and tasks, and I, personally, give high appraisal to the dissertation work.

I suggest that the results of the study have to be turned into a monograph, which will be valuable for medical and non-medical professionals, as well as to expand the audience of the study so that the results of the dissertation work should be presented at scientific forums and included in new publications.

The development meets all 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 a ground to confidently give my positive evaluation of the dissertation work and to propose to the honorable members of the scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” to Mirela Rumenova Strandzheva in the scientific specialty “Social Medicine and Health Management”.

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Prof. Dr. Natasha Danova, dm

