

## **OPINION**

by Prof. Valeri Stoilov Stoyanov, Doctor of Science,

on dissertation on the topic:

### **SPECIFICS AND DYNAMICS OF THE PAIN SYMPTOMS AND EXPERIENCES IN PATIENTS WITH DEPRESSION**

to acquire

Educational and Scientific Degree

"Doctor",

Area of higher education

7. Health and sports,

Professional field 7.1. Medicine

by Dr. Tatyana Ivanova Telbizova

The opinion was developed on the basis of protocol № 1 / 26.04.2021. from a meeting of the Scientific Jury, determined by order № P-109-172 / 23.04.2021 of the Rector of the Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna.

Varna, 2021

## **I. General presentation of the dissertation, topicality of the topic and research results.**

Even after reading the topic of the dissertation, it makes an impression that the application is not just to study the specifics and dynamics of pain symptoms in patients with depression, but above all to reveal their experiences in relation to pain. Exploring people's experiences is a rather ambitious goal, but it corresponds very well with the emerging trend in the social sciences and humanities for a holistic understanding of the nature of man and his existence in the world. To study experiences also implies a different methodological approach to revealing the essence of the phenomenon. Exploring experiences is a direct request to recognize people's individual uniqueness and the need, especially when it comes to psyche and behavior, not to be overlooked. The experience is something very individual and intimate and that is why it is difficult to explore.

The established natural-scientific (quantitative) methodological approach to the study of various phenomena, including in medicine, which is based on philosophical positivism and mathematical-statistical procedures for processing empirical information, would not be very effective and appropriate for such a scientific claim. In this regard, the doctoral student stated in the introduction to the dissertation that the achievement of the research objectives can be achieved by complex use of the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methodological approach. The two alternative approaches to organizing and conducting empirical research in the social sciences and humanities - quantitative, based on natural science methodology and qualitative, based on the humanistic paradigm, differ in their philosophical basis, specific procedures and opportunities for analysis of phenomena. This motivates various researchers and scholars to defend one of them and to consider the insolvency of the other approach. Personally, I am convinced that they should be seen not so much as alternatives, but as complementary approaches and the possibility of their complex use to solve complex problems of clarifying mental phenomena and especially such a phenomenon as experiences. That is why I think that one of the main merits of the evaluated dissertation is to go beyond the statistical summaries of pain and find an adequate approach to understanding the studied phenomenon, to reveal the structure of experiences, the meaning of pain for a particular person, the way it relates to the subjects' own existence. In the context of the above, a similar attitude to the research problem of the specifics and dynamics of pain symptoms in their relationship with depression as a mental state, makes it possible to reveal the individual phenomenology of the experience of pain and through it to create individualized therapeutic approaches aimed at restoring the mental and social functioning of sufferers, despite the pain.

The well-defined topicality of the problem in the introduction of the dissertation and possible ways to penetrate into the essence of the studied phenomenon finds its adequate realization in the developed content, structurally built in a theoretical overview of the problem, methodology of empirical research, results, discussion of results, conclusions. The doctoral student's own empirical research occupies more than two thirds of the volume of work, which I consider appropriate and I think that this is the clearer way to differentiate his contribution to the scientific enrichment of the research topic.

In the first part of the dissertation, Dr. Tatyana Telbizova makes a concise, logical and critical dissection of the phenomenon of "pain". The nature of the pain is clarified, the neurobiological aspects of the pain are revealed. A biopsychosocial model of the phenomenon is presented, and the doctoral student convincingly concludes that psychosocial factors have a significant bearing on the experience of pain, on building personal meaning for it, which in turn affects the mental and social functioning of the sufferer. The conclusion is unequivocal that knowledge of psychosocial factors, including personal characteristics, is essential for the prognosis and management of chronic pain. In this regard, the reasonable inclusion in the theoretical overview of the problem of the situation is impressive.



The scientific tradition in our country, which is based on the philosophical theory of reflection, is to consider the situation as an objectively existing set of circumstances and fragments of the environment. In recent decades, however, the opinion has become increasingly clear, which is confirmed in a number of studies based on quality research methodology, that the situation is an individual construct, a creation of the individual. Relating this fact to experiences means that at the same time, people physically present in the same environment construct different situations, probably similar in many respects, but never the same. In the situation, but as it is for the specific individual, contextual, emotional, cognitive and content (semantic) aspects are focused and integrated, past experience and expectations for the future are intertwined in it. In the context of the above, it is important to conclude that patients with chronic pain suffer not only from the physical (sensory) aspects of pain, but also from the constant correlation of their own existence to pain, from the meaning of life with pain, i.e. from pain experiences. Discrepancies, such as those experienced for what is happening to the individual at the moment, i.e. what it is now, what it wants to be and what it should be, affect mental functioning and adaptation to pain. The substantive aspects of the experiences of patients with chronic pain are an important starting point for predicting future manifestations of anxiety and depression.

The theoretical part of the dissertation shows the in-depth understanding of the issues by the doctoral student, its interdisciplinary understanding and the ability to critically evaluate existing theoretical models and the results of empirical research on topics correlated with the dissertation, and the possibility of their application for specific purposes. An impressive number of literature sources have been processed and used correctly. Most of the literary sources are from the last 10-15 years.

The theoretical review ends with adequate conclusions and an outlined model of the doctoral student's own empirical research, which is associated with one of the identified deficits in the field - the impact of depression and anxiety on the way people construct situations during pain (pain is experienced).

The second part of the dissertation research presents the methodology of the doctoral student's own empirical research. A significant research goal has been stated, the implementation of which would lead to the synthesis of a model for studying the impact of depression and anxiety on pain intensity and their impact on the specificity and dynamics of pain symptoms and experiences in comorbid patients with chronic pain and depression, with potential practical application in clinical work.

The goal is decomposed into five research tasks. Four logical and significant hypotheses are formulated from a scientific point of view and empirically verifiable.

To collect empirical information, a battery was used: survey to collect individual demographic data; four standardized methods - to determine the severity of depressive symptoms, general cognitive functioning, personal and situational anxiety, visual-analog scale for quantitative assessment of pain, as well as and a semi-structured interview to explore pain symptoms and pain-related experiences.

The study was conducted with two groups of subjects - with chronic pain and depression and a second group with chronic pain and no clinical evidence of depression. The study was conducted in two stages with two series of measurements, with clearly defined frameworks and constraints.

I consider the model proposed by the doctoral student for the empirical research as optimal for achieving the goal of the dissertation.

In the third part of the dissertation the results of the empirical research are presented, and in the fourth part they are discussed.

Adequate statistical filters are used for processing the empirical information: descriptive (descriptive) statistics; correlation analysis; regression analysis; Student's t-test for significant differences in the mean values between the variables in the different measurements; Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the scales; content analysis. The listed methods are used correctly.

The statistical processing of the results was carried out with a statistical package of programs "SPSS - 22 - form for expert science".

As the most significant contribution of the doctoral student, I accept the discovery of the specific influence of depression, as a major affective factor, on the variations of the sensation of pain and the experience of pain.

In general, the empirical research is precisely planned and conducted on the basis of the doctoral student's own model, logically synthesized by the theoretical analyzes. The combination of the two established in the social sciences and humanities research approaches - quantitative and qualitative, provides rich information about the dimensions of the phenomenon of pain, the individual meaning of pain and its relationship with personal characteristics (eg personal anxiety) and mental states, which is dominated by anxiety/restlessness and depression.

The empirical information is appropriately processed and the qualitative analyzes are in-depth, with the precise content analysis making a special impression. These are signs of a pronounced research culture of the author and depth of interdisciplinary understanding of the issue. The dissertation has scientific and applied scientific contributions in the current field of human knowledge and clinical practice.

The abstract fully reflects the content of the dissertation. The main results of the dissertation research are presented to the scientific community and the interested audiences at scientific conferences and in renowned journals, referenced in world databases with scientific information.

I have no significant remarks on the proposed dissertation.

I have not found plagiarism by the doctoral student. Literary sources are used correctly.

## **II. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions**

The dissertation gives grounds for formulating the following scientific and scientific-applied contributions:

1. An in-depth, critical analysis of existing concepts and explanatory models for pain has been made, clarifying strengths and shortcomings. On this basis, the multidimensionality of the phenomenon is outlined and a model is synthesized, by combining the quantitative and qualitative research approach, to study the specifics of the experience of pain in patients with depression.
2. Through specific own empirical research, with a logical methodological model, precisely developed procedure and selected tools for collecting empirical information, the specific and dominant experiences characteristic of patients with chronic pain and depression have been revealed.
3. Successful operationalization of experiences in patients with chronic pain and depression has been made, revealing the dynamics of experiences as a result of the treatment of depression.
3. The practical-applied need for searching for symptoms of depression and its treatment is outlined, as a central concept for individualization of the approaches for management of chronic pain.



### III. Conclusion

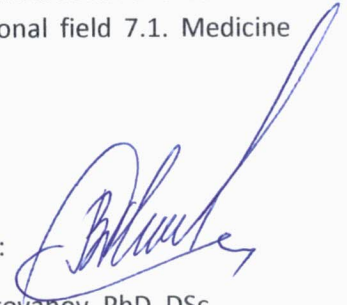
The presented dissertation is a comprehensive, up-to-date interdisciplinary study in a significant area of knowledge about man, his experiences and behavior. It has the characteristics of a completed monographic work. The scientific contributions are of theoretical and applied-practical nature.

My overall assessment of the work is positive and this gives me reason to recommend to the esteemed members of the scientific jury, fully convinced, to vote for the award of educational and scientific degree "Doctor", Area of higher education 7. Health and Sports, Professional field 7.1. Medicine (Psychiatry) by Dr. Tatyana Ivanova Telbizova.

13.05.2021

Varna

Prepared the opinion:



Prof. Valeri Stoyanov, PhD, DSc