

## STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Darina Naydenova Hristova, MD, PhD  
Speciality "Nutrition and dietetics", Department of Hygiene and Epidemiology,  
Head of the ES Hygiene, Faculty of Public health,  
Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" – Varna  
for dissertation for the award of educational and scientific degree "Doctor"  
in the scientific specialty "Hygiene" on the topic:

### **"Early Childhood Development: Features and Prevention of Disorders"**

of **Dr. Ekaterina Ivanova Valtcheva**, PhD student at MU-Varna

#### **Brief data on the professional development of the candidate**

**Ekaterina Ivanova Valtcheva** graduated the Medical Institute - Varna in 1996. Six years later she acquired her first specialty in "Paediatric", and in 2021 she successfully passed the exam for the specialty "Hygiene of children and adolescents". In the meantime, she has worked consecutively as a doctor at the Mother and Child Medical and Social Care Home; Resident in the Department of Pediatrics, University Hospital St. Marina; Pediatrician in the Neonatology Department of the Specialized Hospital for Obstetrics and Gynecology "Prof. Dr. D. Stamatov", in the Clinic of Pediatric Oncohematology at the University Hospital "St. Marina", Varna, and since 2011 as an assistant in hygiene at the Medical University - Varna. The PhD student has gained experience as a practicing pediatrician with a focus on counseling and prevention for more than 25 years, which turns out to be a huge plus in the development of this dissertation. There are a large number of specialized trainings in the field of children's health and development, mainly abroad. Dr. Valtcheva participates in a number of scientific and research projects. In 2018, Dr. Valtcheva initiated and successfully implemented the unique for our country project "The Green Sea Yard of Varna".

The whole procedure for enrollment, taking the exam for PhD minimum, deduction and referral to public defense is in accordance with the legal provisions and the Rules for the development of the academic staff of MU - Varna. By order of the Rector P-109-49/01.02.2019 Dr. Valtcheva is enrolled in doctoral studies in full-time form for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" on the topic **"Early Childhood Development: Features and Prevention of Disorders"** in the field of higher education: 7. Healthcare and sports; professional field: 7.1 Medicine and specialty: Hygiene with scientific supervisor Prof. Teodora Todorova Dimitrova, MD, PhD. By order of the Rector

№ P-109-193/28.04.2021 the PhD student was expelled with the right to defense and successfully passed the internal defense, held on 11.04.2022.

### **Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation**

The dissertation has a volume of 232 standard pages and is designed according to the requirements. The structural sections of the dissertation are well balanced and are in logical sequence: literature review, purpose, tasks, research methodology, results and discussion, conclusions and contributions. 281 literary sources were cited, of which 98 in Cyrillic and 183 in Latin. The dissertation includes 6 tables and 98 figures, which very well present the volume of work and provide a basis for analytical discussion of the results. The literature review summarizes current information and shows serious knowledge, enviable experience and personal attitude of the candidate to the researched problem.

*Relevance of the topic of the dissertation.* The doctoral student focuses on a very important topic in both practical and public health aspects: the problems of early childhood development (ECD) and prevention at this age. ECD, scientifically proven, is the most significant, unique in its nature - with its quantitative and qualitative changes - period of childhood, which marks the well-being and quality of life of each of us for life. The early child period is considered to be the most important developmental phase throughout the lifespan. What happens to the child in the early years is critical for the child's developmental trajectory and lifecourse. The focus of this study is on phase 2 of ECD - from birth to 3 years of age. The reason for the position in the choice of work definition is the scientific evidence that it is during this time that the child's brain develops at a rate that is never repeated throughout life and therefore nutrition, protection/safety and responsible stimulation through play and communicate with loving adults and the care, are the goal of the whole society. This study lays the foundations for a study of the parent community in Bulgaria. Establishes the degree of awareness of the importance of ECD for it, the needs of parents of modern knowledge, practices, competencies and opportunities for prevention of disorders determines the relevance of the topic of this dissertation.

*Literature review:* the theoretical substantiation and research of the available literature sources on the topic of the dissertation occupy about 30% of the total volume of the work and are well structured. The issues of impact of the formative environment for harmonious child development and well-being are discussed in depth. Particular attention is paid to the topic of features and prevention of disorders in ECD.

*The purpose* of the dissertation is precisely defined: To establish the importance of early childhood development (ECD) in the parent community in Bulgaria and

the resulting needs for knowledge, practices, competencies and opportunities for prevention of disorders. The results of the research should be used for the purpose of health promotion and prevention in early childhood and for increasing parental competence. To achieve this goal, six tasks have been formulated, the main of which is to assess parental awareness and competencies for ECD up to 3 years and 11 months.

*The methodology* is described in detail and uses the qualitative research "Participant Observation" was conducted by the PhD student in the community of "The Green Sea Yard of Varna" - an area for early socialization and prevention of children from 0 to 3 years. It was carried out in a real environment, for 14 months, in 2 days of the week for 4 hours in the period 2020 - 2021. In 2022 a quantitative sociological survey was conducted - a national online survey with parents-respondents for the period of 30 days. The survey uses a "Questionnaire for measuring the importance of early childhood development in the parental community." The questionnaire is an author's product of the team under Project № 19021/2019 of the Science Fund on "Early childhood development - a determinant of health and quality of life in the modern society", with a leading researcher - the PhD student.

*The results* show that there is an underestimation in the Bulgarian society of early learning as part of the five key elements of "developing care" for complete ECD. Despite the unified global framework for the key elements of ECD, parents focus on specific priorities in ECD, which can be both positive and negative. The analysis of the results shows that in the Bulgarian society lacks a comprehensive concept of ECD, positioned at the level of health promotion and uniting the interests of all stakeholders. Significant gaps in the knowledge of knowing the attitudes about the importance of ECD in the parent community is crucial for the implementation of policies in the field of health promotion and for the justification of specific future interventions - at the individual and population level.

*Contributions:* The contributions derived by Dr. Valtcheva are both theoretical and scientifically applied. The performed in-depth analytical review of the interactions on the parent-child-specialist axis in the period of ECD are studied using simultaneously complementary qualitative and quantitative research in limiting pandemic conditions. Particularly important is the developed original author's "Questionnaire for measuring the importance of ECD in the parental community". Based on the analyzes, the PhD student makes specific, detailed and precise recommendations and a systematic approach is applied, which is expressed in the unification and development of ideas and results of the trinity - dissertation, research project and activities in space for early socialization and prevention of children from 0 months to 3 years - with the common goal of

creating and building unified prophylactic environment in the period of ECD in the Bulgarian society.

Dr. Valtcheva's *recommendations* are aimed at various addressees: at national and regional level, educational institutions, parents/nuclear family, extended family, future parents, specialists, non-specialists - all of them engaged in policies and activities in the field of ECD.

*The abstract* is prepared according to the requirements and fully reflects the content of the dissertation, presents in detail the main results, conclusions and contributions of this paper. Dr. Valtcheva applies three publications and 4 scientific communications - all in connection with the topic of the dissertation.

**Conclusion:**

The dissertation presented for defense on "**Early Childhood Development: Features and Prevention of Disorders**" is fully compliant with the requirements of the Medical University - Varna. Significant and important for public health scientific work has been developed with indisputable theoretical and, above all, applied contributions. The topic is extremely timely and relevant, the literary awareness is high, the main goal and tasks are formulated clearly and competently. The obtained results give a very large amount of scientific information - analytically presented facts, skillfully presented and interpreted, practically oriented messages. The formed algorithm, conclusions and recommendations are correct and adequate to the results. The candidate has all the grounds for scientific growth as a specialist in this specific field of public health.

I fully believe in my *positive assessment* and invite the other members of the esteemed Scientific Jury to vote positively for the award of **Ekaterina Ivanova Valtcheva** to the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Hygiene".

18.05.2022

Signature: 

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. D. Naidenova, MD)