

OPINION

From: Assoc. Prof. Mariana Dimitrova-Haruil, PhD

Academic specialty: Paediatric Dentistry, Faculty of Dental Medicine, Medical University of Plovdiv; member of the Scientific Jury appointed by Order No. R-5631/30 September 2026 of the Rector of the Medical University of Plovdiv.

Regarding: The procedure for the public defence of the dissertation entitled “Models for Pricing and Remuneration of Activities in Outpatient Dental Care”, submitted within the doctoral programme “Social Medicine and Organisation of Healthcare and Pharmacy”, in professional field 7.1 Healthcare and Sports, by a doctoral candidate pursuing independent study at the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University of Plovdiv.

Dissertation author: Dr Ivelina Tenkova Popova-Sotirova

Academic supervisors: Prof. Nina Musurlieva, MD, PhD

Prof. Ralitsa Raycheva, MD, PhD

General overview of the procedure and the doctoral candidate

The set of documents submitted to me in hard-copy and electronic form has been prepared in accordance with the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and the Regulations of the Medical University of Plovdiv for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”, and includes all the required accompanying documents.

Dr Ivelina Popova was born in the city of Plovdiv. She graduated from the Faculty of Dental Medicine in Plovdiv in 1992. Dr Popova began her professional career as a resident dentist in 1996 at the Municipal Dental Polyclinic in Karlovo. In 1996, she opened her own dental practice in Plovdiv. On 1 April 2022, following

a successful competitive selection procedure, she was appointed as an assistant at the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University of Plovdiv. In 2025, she obtained a specialty in Public Dental Health. Dr Popova participates in teaching Bulgarian-speaking and English-speaking students. She has an excellent command of English.

Topical relevance of the subject and appropriateness of the aims and objectives

In the contemporary context of transforming healthcare systems, increasing digitalisation, demographic challenges and growing social sensitivity to inequalities in access to healthcare services, the issue of appropriate pricing and remuneration of medical activities has become particularly pressing. One of the most critical and, at the same time, underestimated segments in this context is outpatient dental care, which provides a substantial share of healthcare for the population but suffers from chronic underfunding, unclear pricing mechanisms and the absence of a sustainable economic operating model. In Bulgaria, dental medicine is organised predominantly within outpatient care, delivered by individual and group practices operating under contracts with the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF), health insurance funds or on the free market.

Patients' growing expectations regarding timely access, high quality and an individualised approach call for a new philosophy in the organisation of dental care—one in which the financial model is not merely administered, but deliberately structured to reflect actual value, the added benefit to the patient and the professional's commitment. Against this background, there is a clear need to develop a scientifically grounded, transparent and flexible model for pricing and remunerating dental activities.

The present dissertation places this very issue at the centre of its investigation: how to structure pricing and remuneration models in dental care

that are objective, effective and acceptable to stakeholders. The study is not confined to an economic framework, but examines the issue in its full complexity, including the interaction between regulation, market dynamics, social attitudes, professional expectations and actual clinical processes. This entails both an assessment of the current situation and the development of an innovative model, followed by its empirical validation through the opinions and perceptions of patients and dental practitioners. The topical relevance of the subject is further underscored by reforms in the health insurance system, growing interest in Value-Based Healthcare, and the increasingly important role of patients as informed participants in the healthcare system. The combination of these elements places the study at the intersection of several disciplines, including health economics, public administration, health ethics and organisational management. In this context, the dissertation offers not only an academic contribution but also the potential for practical application in policies and practices governing dental care. The proposed model aims to establish a new paradigm in which transparency, efficiency and social sensitivity are combined in a sustainable and applicable system that takes into account the needs of both patients and professionals.

The focus on mechanisms for pricing and financing outpatient dental care is essential, and the dissertation lays the foundations for establishing an objective, transparent and sustainable economic system. I endorse the choice of this subject and consider it timely and suitable for doctoral research.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation comprises 193 pages and includes 18 tables, 15 figures, 14 charts and 4 appendices. The bibliography contains 93 references, of which 23 are in Cyrillic script and 70 in Latin script. The dissertation is appropriately structured and contains all the essential elements required for the preparation and presentation of a doctoral dissertation: introduction, literature review, aim and

objectives, materials and methods, results and discussion (for each objective), conclusion, findings, bibliography and appendices.

Knowledge of the subject

The literature review spans 65 pages. It is comprehensive, informative and appropriately structured. The literature reviewed focuses on the analysis of laws, regulations and normative documents governing various health insurance systems in Europe and worldwide. The review concludes by highlighting unresolved issues in Bulgaria, which justify the choice of this timely dissertation topic and inform its aim and objectives.

Dr Ivelina Popova-Sotirova has accurately formulated the aim of the dissertation, namely: “To develop and empirically validate an innovative model for pricing and remunerating dental activities in outpatient care that reflects actual costs, the quality characteristics of services and the expectations of the principal stakeholders—dental practitioners and patients. The model should be applicable in the Bulgarian context and meet the requirements of transparency, predictability and economic sustainability.”

To achieve this aim, the doctoral candidate has formulated six objectives. I consider these objectives sufficient and appropriately formulated to fulfil the stated aim. The materials and methods are described in detail for each individual objective. The study populations and subjects have been carefully selected in accordance with the objectives. The research methods chosen make it possible to achieve the stated aim and provide adequate answers to the objectives and to the research hypotheses formulated by the doctoral candidate.

The results are comprehensive and are presented separately for each objective. They are accurately described, analysed, interpreted and critically discussed in the section entitled “Discussion”, which is provided for each objective individually.

Contributions

Dr Ivelina Popova identifies a total of seven scientific and applied contributions, divided into three broad groups: theoretical and conceptual; empirical and sociological; and practical, applied and economic. I accept without reservation the contributions presented by the doctoral candidate in the abstract.

Assessment of publications and the doctoral candidate's personal contribution

The main focus of Dr Popova-Sotirova's research activity is the economics, organisation and management of dental care, pricing mechanisms, and the accessibility of dental services in Bulgaria.

The author presents five full-text publications related to the dissertation.

I consider this body of scientific work entirely sufficient to confirm the significance of the dissertation.

The doctoral candidate's personal involvement in conducting the dissertation research and processing the results obtained is beyond doubt.

Dissertation abstract

The submitted dissertation abstract comprises 72 pages and fully reflects the dissertation in summarised form. It is well structured and, in terms of length, meets accepted academic requirements. It contains all the essential elements: introduction, aim and objectives, materials and methods, results and discussion, findings and contributions. The figures and other illustrative material are presented appropriately, provide detailed information about the research conducted and the results obtained, and are entirely adequate.

Critical remarks and recommendations

Having reviewed the dissertation submitted, I recommend that the section "Aim and Objectives" be presented as a separate section both in the table of contents and in the main text. Notwithstanding this recommendation, it does not diminish the scientific value of the dissertation.

Conclusion

Dr Ivelina Popova-Sotirova has conducted focused and independent research and presents a dissertation on a timely subject, supported by a sufficient body of evidence and yielding results of theoretical and practical significance. The dissertation demonstrates that Dr Popova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge in the field of public health and the qualities and skills required to conduct independent scientific research.

The dissertation contains research findings with practical applications that constitute an original contribution to science, and it meets the requirements and criteria of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, its implementing regulations, and the relevant regulations of the Medical University of Plovdiv.

In view of the foregoing, I confidently give my positive assessment of the research presented in the dissertation and recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury award Dr Ivelina Popova-Sotirova the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” within the doctoral programme in Social Medicine and Organisation of Healthcare and Pharmacy.

15 October 2026
Plovdiv

Chair of the Scientific Jury: 
/Assoc. Prof. Mariana Dimitrova-Haruil, MD, PhD/