



## STATE OF MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTHCARE IN BULGARIA ACCORDING TO PATIENTS AND HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

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### Abstract

All studied and analyzed strategic documents - report to public health, the updated demographic strategy of Bulgaria National Health Strategy argue about problems in maternal and child health. The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the views of patients and health professionals about the status of maternal and child health care in Bulgaria and the problems in health activities. Through a survey conducted over a period of one year, from October 2016 to October 2017 is analyzed the respondents opinion on: the coverage of the necessary consultations examinations of the package of services that is provided to pregnant women by the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF), as well as knowledge of the package of activities (examinations, studies and immunizations) included in the program "Children's Health" developed by the NHIF. The necessity of providing comprehensive medical care for pregnant women and children with chronic illnesses are established.

**Keywords:** maternal and child health care, package of services, complex services.

### INTRODUCTION

The current demographic situation of the Bulgarian population is a result of the prolonged action of many factors and influences. Some of them are related to general tendencies in the demographic development of the European countries, others to the specific features of the historical, economic and cultural development of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The purpose of this study is to study and analyze the opinion of patients and healthcare professionals on the state of maternal and child healthcare in Bulgaria.

In order to achieve this purpose, we set out the following main tasks:

1. Investigating the opinion of patients and healthcare professionals on ensuring unimpeded access to quality and effective health services.
2. Exploring respondents' awareness of the National Program for the Improvement of Maternal and Child Health 2014-2020
3. Establishing the opinion of the respondents regarding the coverage of the necessary consultations, examinations and studies from the service package that is provided to pregnant women from the National Health Insurance Fund.

4. Exploring the respondents' knowledge of the package of activities (examinations, studies and immunizations) included in the program "Children's Health", developed by the NHIF.
5. Formulation of conclusions and recommendations for improvement of maternal and child healthcare in Bulgaria.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A questionnaire method is used to objectify the observed results. The respondents' surveys were conducted over a period of one year, from October 2016 to October 2017, among all those responding to the web-based questionnaires published on the websites of the Union of Transplants, the Association of Parents of Children with Down syndrome, Zachatie Association, I want baby, Alliance of Bulgarian Midwives, as well as the DCCs, APOMCs and hospitals in the cities of Stara Zagora, Radnevo; Haskovo, Dimitrovgrad, Svilengrad; Yambol; Burgas; Pazardzhik, Velingrad, Panagurishte; Pernik, Breznik; Blagoevgrad; Karlovo; Sopot; Silistra; Sofia. The study covered 3015 patients and 725 healthcare professionals.

The quantitative analyzes were made with a statistical suite of application programs - SPSS 17.0. Microsoft Office products were used for the table and graphic processing and presentation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The two groups of respondents (patients and health professionals) differ significantly by age - the average age of mothers is 29.6 years, and of health professionals - 41.2 years. There is also a difference in residence between the inhabitants of the villages (a much larger share among mothers) and in the cities (a higher share among health professionals), while the share of the inhabitants of the capital is roughly the same.

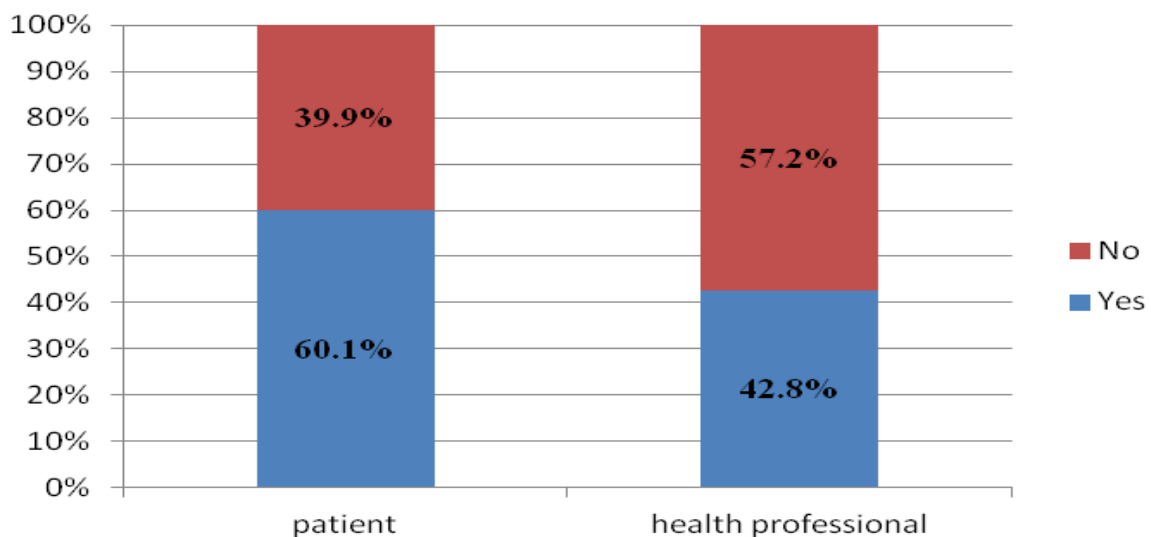


Fig. 1: Frequency of distribution of patients and health professionals regarding their opinion on ensuring unimpeded access to quality and effective health services

Health professionals (57.2%) express their opinion in a more categorical way that unimpeded access to quality and effective health services is not provided, while mothers (39.9%) are more moderate in their opinions (Figure 1).

To the question "Are you aware of the existence of the National Program for the Improvement of Maternal and Child Health 2014-2020?" Health professionals (53.1%) show much more awareness than mothers and pregnant women (31%), which is understandable given the fact that this is part of their profession (Figure 2).

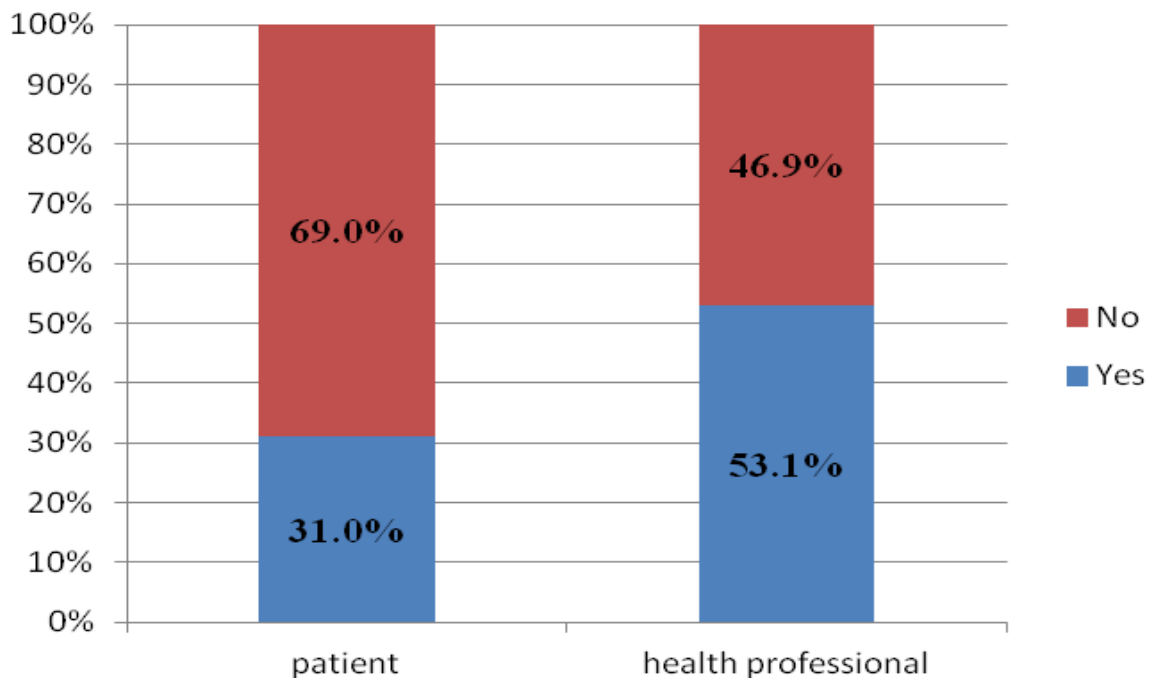


Fig. 2: Distribution of respondents on their awareness of the existence of the National Program for the Improvement of Maternal and Child Health 2014-2020?

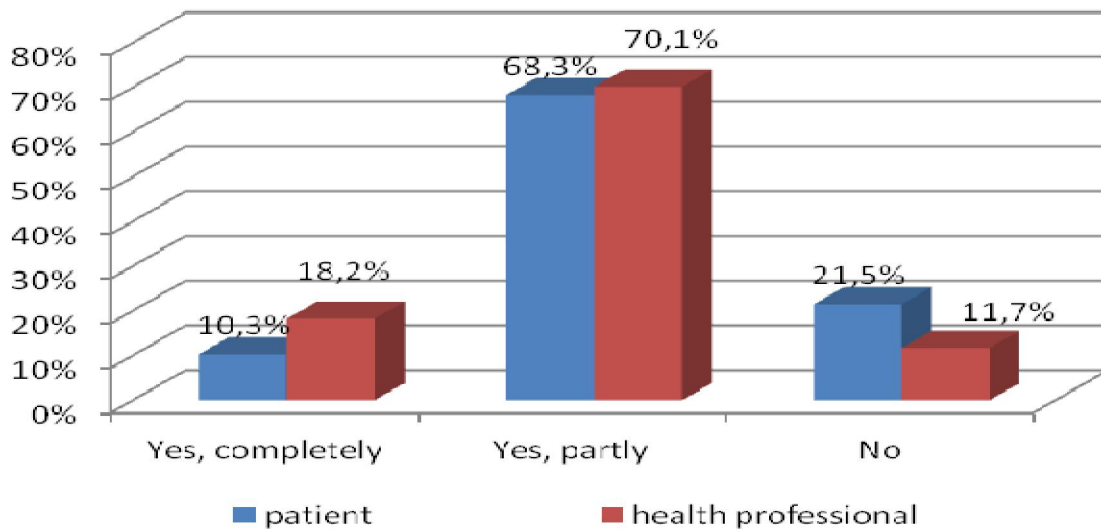


Fig. 3: Frequency of distribution of responses on the knowledge of the activities provided by the Maternal and Child Health Centers

Understandably, among those who responded with "Yes", when asked if they are aware of the activities provided by the program, health professionals again demonstrate higher levels of knowledge on the subject - 88.3% are familiar with the program's activities to varying degrees. (Figure 3)

Healthcare professionals (52.4%) are more explicit that the package of services provided to pregnant women by the NHIF does not cover the necessary consultations, examinations and studies compared to the opinions expressed by the mothers (43.7%) ( Figure 4).

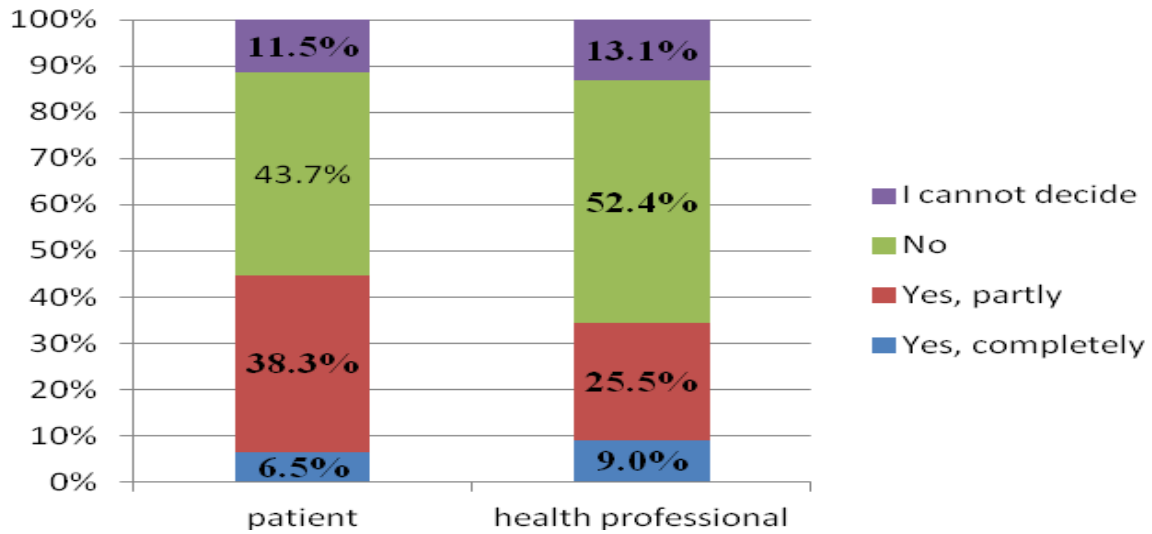


Fig. 4: Frequency of distribution of respondents regarding the coverage of the necessary consultations, examinations and studies from the service package provided to pregnant women by the NHIF

Mothers report a higher level of knowledge (71.9% are aware of to varying degrees) regarding the package of activities (examinations, studies and immunizations) included in the program "Child health" developed by the NHIF compared to the assessment of the healthcare professionals' knowledge (37.2%) (Figure 5).

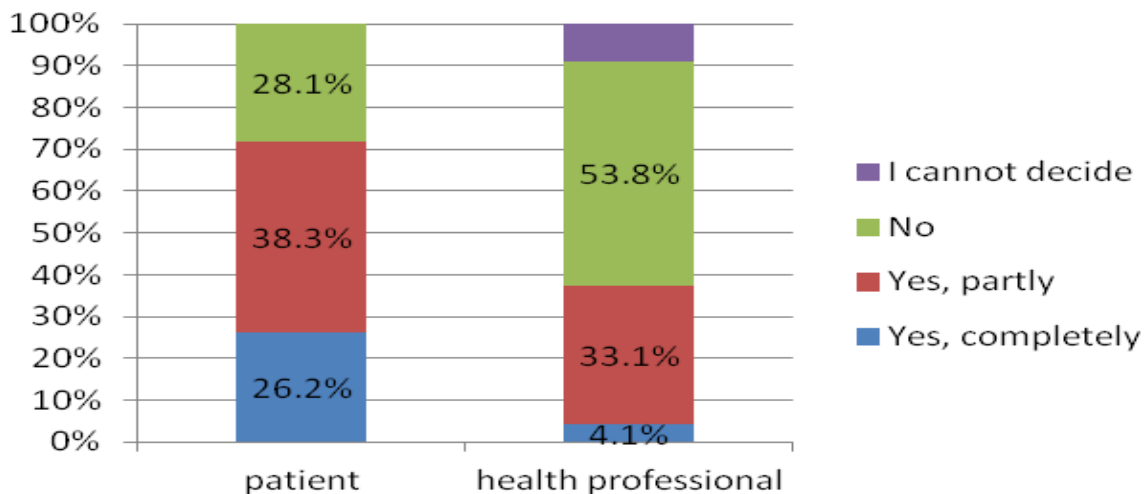


Fig. 5: Distribution of the answers to the question "Are you aware of/ Do you think that the patients are aware of the package of activities (examinations, studies and immunizations) included in the program "Child health" developed by the NHIF?", separately for mothers and health professionals

A large proportion of the surveyed patients (80.5%) and the majority of the health professionals included in the survey (86.2%) believe that the availability of comprehensive medical care for pregnant women and children with chronic illnesses would give them peace of mind during pregnancy and confidence in childcare. The difference in the two groups is in the respondents with "I cannot decide" - significantly fewer among the midwives and other specialists (6.9%) compared to the patients (15.8%) (Figure 6)

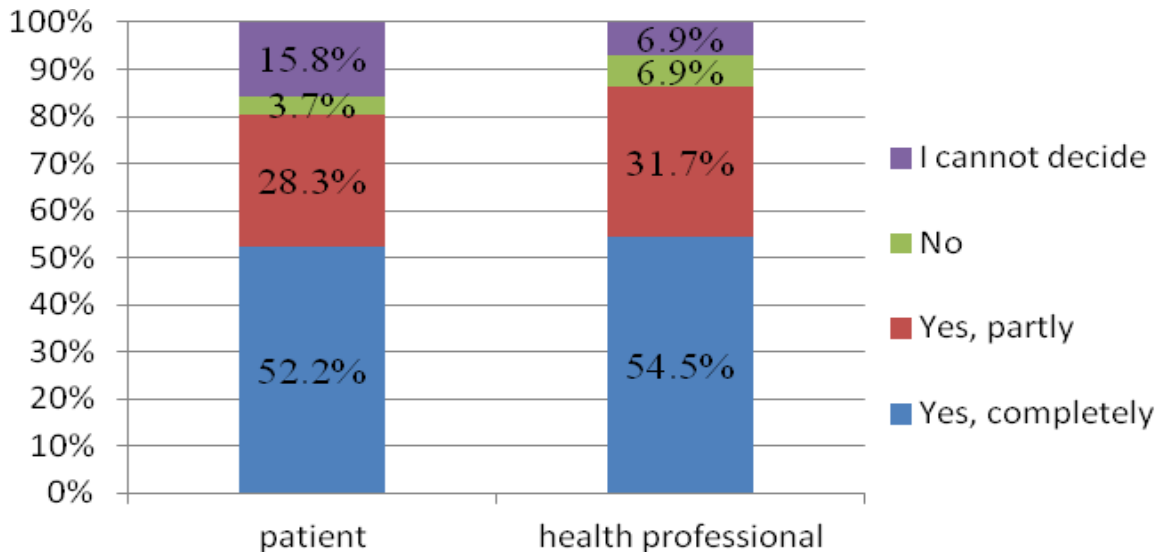


Fig. 6: Distribution of responses to the question "Do you think that the availability of comprehensive medical care for pregnant women and children with chronic illnesses will give you peace of mind during pregnancy and confidence in childcare" separately for mothers and health professionals

## CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the results obtained in our study among healthcare professionals and patients about the state of maternal and child health in Bulgaria, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. According to 60.1% of the respondents, there is an unimpeded access to quality and effective health services provided, with the lowest share in the villages (54.4%) and among the lowest earners (54.4%), while according to 57.2% of healthcare professionals the provided access is not unimpeded.
2. Less than one third (31%) of the surveyed pregnant women and mothers with children and slightly more than half of health professionals (53.1%) are aware of the existence of a National Program for the Improvement of Maternal and Child Health 2014-2020, while every tenth woman of which (10,3%) and 18.2% of health professionals are fully aware of the activities included in the program.
3. The relative share of both healthcare professionals (52.4%) and of pregnant women and mothers with children (43.7%) who consider that the package of services provided to pregnant women by the NHIF does not cover the necessary consultations, examinations and studies is very high.
4. Only 26.2% of mothers are fully aware of the package of activities included in the Children's Health Program developed by the NHIF, 45.7% are only partially aware, and 28.1% are not aware of it. Every second healthcare professional (53.8%) shares the view that patients are unaware of this package of activities and one in three (33.1%) thinks they are partially aware.
5. A very large proportion of the women surveyed (80.5%) and 86.2% of the health professionals are convinced that the availability of comprehensive medical care for pregnant women and children with chronic illnesses would give them peace of mind during pregnancy and confidence in childcare.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the study, the following recommendations could be made to the Ministry of Health:

1. Implementation of legislative changes to ensure the creation of "Integrated In-Institutional Medical and Social Units for Maternal and Child Health", which will ensure unimpeded access to quality and effective health services.



2. Active role of the state in securing adequate financing of the new structures.
3. Creation of incentives for specialists / obstetricians and pediatricians / and healthcare professionals to work in the new units.
4. Development and adoption of a midwifery standard regulating midwifery prenatal and postnatal patronage care and complying with European legislation.
5. Attracting other specialists - social worker, psychologist, speech therapist, in order to provide complex services to the needy.
6. Creation of a national register covering children with chronic diseases, which will receive information from the established structures.

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