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**Review for the doctoral dissertation of Balnur Iskakova on the topic
“Measuring HIV-related stigma in healthcare settings” for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy (PhD) in the specialty 6D110200 “Public Health”**

In her dissertation work, Balnur Iskakova aims to assess the level of and explore determinants of HIV-related stigma in primary healthcare settings in Almaty, Kazakhstan. She utilizes a mixed-methods study design in her approach. For the quantitative phase of data collection, she surveyed 448 healthcare providers that work in primary healthcare settings in Almaty. For the qualitative phase, she conducted a series of focus group discussions in order to explore these topics of HIV-related stigma more in-depth.

Balnur Iskakova has selected an important topic for her dissertation research. Studying HIV-related stigma is crucial for the better management of HIV prevention, treatment, and care. People living with HIV (PLHIV) may experience stigma due to their HIV-positive status, and also related to belong to other marginalized populations (for example, people who inject drugs, sexual and gender minorities, sex workers), in a variety of social settings, including healthcare. Previous scientific literature on the topic suggests that healthcare settings are one of the most commonly reported areas of stigma and discrimination. This manifests itself in the form of being denied medical care, experiencing judgment, having one’s HIV-status disclosed without consent, and being treated unfairly or poorly. Kazakhstan, like other countries in the Eastern European and Central Asian (EECA) region, has experienced an increased in new HIV cases in recent decades and troubling levels of HIV-related stigma. The issue of HIV-related stigma in the country has been mainly studied from the perspective of PLHIV. Balnur Iskakova’s dissertation is focused on the healthcare providers’ perspectives. The current dissertation is a critical addition to the scientific literature on this important topic. The findings have the potential to be used in further research studies and in the development of HIV-prevention and treatment interventions in the country.

I have been serving as one of the advisors for Balnur Iskakova’s dissertation research for the past three years. I can confirm that her dissertation is based on well-structured data collection and analysis. It was an ambitious and novel undertaking to conduct primary data collection using both quantitative and qualitative methods. This is very impressive, especially under the conditions of the past few years with the COVID-19 pandemic interrupting research plans across the globe. Balnur should be commended for her work and perseverance in both completing the dissertation research and disseminating her results. Balnur has already presented her research at several scientific conferences. Most notably, Balnur has first-authored a manuscript in a peer-review journal based on the first phase of her dissertation research. She revalidated a study instrument to measure HIV-

related stigma among healthcare providers in Kazakh and Russian languages and adapted it for the local context. The results were published in the prestigious PLOS One journal this past year, which is indicative of the high-quality level of research that Balnur has undertaken for her dissertation. She is currently writing a second scientific manuscript based on her mixed-methods findings on the factors associated with HIV-related stigma among healthcare providers.

In conclusion, I have been impressed with the work that Balnur Iskakova has completed for her dissertation research and believe that it meets the requirements expected of a doctoral student. I hope that you will determine to award Balnur Iskakova the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the specialty 6D110200 "Public Health" at Asfendiyarov Kazakh National Medical University.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Elizabeth J. King". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'X' at the end.

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