

Diet therapy as a component of ancient medicine

Marta J. Petryshyn¹, Halina M. Zahajska², Oxana V. Liubimova²

¹VASYL STEFANYK CARPATHIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, IVANO-FRANKIVSK, UKRAINE

²YURIY FEDKOVIYCH CHERNIVTSI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, CHERNIVTSI, UKRAINE

ABSTRACT

Aim: To analyze of dietotherapy as employed by Roman physicians in the treatment of therapeutic diseases since one of the important methods of successful treatment and recovery is a properly formulated diet.

Materials and Methods: The subject of this study is *De Medicina*, the work of Aulus Cornelius Celsus, the renowned Roman scholar and encyclopedist, the author of an eight-volume medical treatise, which summarizes the experience of ancient medicine in the fields of therapy, surgery, pathology, and dietetics. The application of analytical and synthetic methods, contextual and comparative analysis, and the descriptive method enabled the investigation of the specifics of diet therapy as a key treatment modality in ancient medical practice

Conclusions: Critically summarizing the achievements of medicine in therapy, surgery, and pathology, Celsus consistently emphasized the importance of diet therapy in the treatment and prevention of diseases. As a result of the research, it has been established that even in ancient times, the nutrition of a sick person was considered the fundamental basis upon which other therapeutic measures should be applied. Dietary nutrition was aimed at reducing the risk of complications, restoring the body, and preventing diseases. The main principles of ancient diet therapy were based on the following: aligning the diet with the physiological needs of the body during illness, adapting food processing methods for specific diseases, determining the duration of the diet depending on the characteristics of the disease's progression, maintaining water balance, and applying principles of adjustment, substitution, and physical or mechanical protection of the affected system or organ.

KEY WORDS: history of medicine, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, diet and nutrition, diet therapy, internal diseases

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INTRODUCTION

The connection between nutrition and health has been recognized since ancient times. Food has always been not only a crucial factor in ensuring human vitality, growth, and development of the organism but also a means of preventing and treating many diseases, a source of preserving health, enhancing resistance to harmful environmental factors, maintaining high work capacity, and promoting active longevity. Ancient physicians accumulated significant experience regarding the role of nutrition in the rehabilitation of patients, understanding that diet therapy is not only an effective means of comprehensive treatment for many diseases but also contributes to strengthening and preserving health. In light of this, it is important to study the experience of ancient medicine in historical retrospect, analyze it, and adapt their contributions to the history of the development of modern dietetics.

AIM

The aim of the present article is to analyze of dietotherapy as employed by Roman physicians in the treatment of therapeutic diseases since one of the important methods of successful treatment and recovery is a properly formulated diet.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research material is based on *De Medicina*, the work by the Roman encyclopedist, physician, and medical theorist of the era of Emperors Augustus and Tiberius, Aulus Cornelius Celsus (25 BCE – 50 CE) [1], who is considered the founder of Latin anatomical terminology. Due to his clear and comprehensible style of presentation, contemporaries rightly referred to him as the 'Cicero of Medicine' or the 'Roman Hippocrates.' For centuries, Celsus' work was regarded as one of the best medical manuals in Europe.

The methodological framework for studying the role of dietary nutrition in treatment and rapid rehabilitation in ancient medicine involves a range of general and specialized scientific methods. The method of analysis and synthesis allowed for the systematization of scientific developments on the mentioned issues. The method of text analysis and interpretation was employed to identify key terms and concepts of dietary nutrition in ancient medicine, the therapeutic properties of food, and to discern dietary recommendations for the prevention and treatment of internal diseases within the text. Contextual analysis elucidated the link between treatment efficacy for internal organ disorders and patient diet, and situated Celsus' diet therapy in ancient medical traditions. Comparative analysis facilitated the interpretation of ancient diet therapy principles relative to modern medical practice. The descriptive method was used to classify and interpret the research material.

ETHICS

All sources used in this literature review are publicly available.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Nutrition is the foundation of all vital processes in the organism, encompassing intake, digestion, absorption, and assimilation of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and water. Rational nutrition supports growth and development, maintains immunity, helps protect the human body from adverse conditions, aids in recovery and disease prevention, and positively impacts the restoration of work capacity and the extension of life expectancy.

Over the years, a number of works have emerged dedicated to the study of the clinical-physiological and clinical-biochemical foundations of nutrition for both healthy and ill individuals. In the book *Health on Your Table* by Ilina S., the experience of generations regarding the medicinal properties of the plant world and their use to overcome ailments is summarized [2]. In the work *The ABCs of Nutrition* by Stolkakova G. and Martyniuk I., the organization of therapeutic nutrition in hospital settings is thoroughly described, along with the principles of nutrition at home for diseases of the digestive, circulatory, respiratory, urinary systems, metabolic disorders, and more [3]. The monographic study by Telezhenko L., Dziuba N., and Kashkano M. is devoted to characterizing the impact of alimentary factors on the functioning of the main systems of the human body, and outlining the principles of nutrition for diabetes, nervous system disorders, vision problems,

and more [4]. In the book by the renowned doctor of medicine M. Greger, the specifics of various diseases are thoroughly examined, and the corresponding dietary regimens are determined [5]. The research by Cherevko O. and others is related to the study of modern approaches to dietary nutrition for various diseases of organs and systems [6]. The scientific investigation by Downer S. and her colleagues addresses the issue of properly tailored nutrition for patients for prevention, treatment, or recovery after severe illness [7]. In the article by Khasanova G. and others, the recommendations of the World Health Organization and leading European dietitians and cardiologists regarding the alimentary specifics of hypertension are summarized [8]. The scientific inquiries of Demydenko M. and Zakharova I. are related to the study of the impact of diet therapy and controlled physical exercise on weight reduction and the prevention of obesity-related complications [9]. In the research by Hovorun D. and Horoshko V., the results of a study on the influence of diet therapy on the recovery of brain function and the overall health of patients after ischemic stroke are presented. [10]. A thorough analysis of the literature on the use of neuroprotective diets, various food, vitamin and mineral supplements in the treatment and rehabilitation of patients with acute stroke can be found in the article *Nutrition, Energy Expenditure, Dysphagia, and Self-Efficacy in Stroke Rehabilitation: A Review of the Literature* [11]. The scientific study by Kolasinski S. highlights the specifics of dietary regimens for patients with gout, particularly: limiting the consumption of purine-rich foods, restricting alcohol intake, and diets that lead to weight loss by reducing calorie and carbohydrate intake, which can be effective in lowering serum urate levels and the risk of gout [12]. The analysis of scientific sources demonstrates that researchers are focusing on a wide range of issues related to the modern application of specially designed dietary regimens and nutrition plans for therapeutic or preventive purposes for patients with various pathologies and across different age groups. However, the origins of diet therapy as a system of treatment and disease prevention date back to antiquity. Certain studies are dedicated to examining the contributions of ancient Greek physicians to the development and popularization of diet therapy. For example, in the article *Synergism of Health-Preserving Ideas of Hippocrates in the Context of the Development of Dietetics*, based on the works of Hippocrates, the founder of dietetics as a distinct field of health preservation and strengthening, the emergence of the term *dietetics* is explored, its essence in antiquity is explained, and an analysis of the ancient Greek physician's recommendations regarding dietary principles and regimen according to the seasons

is presented [13]. The influence of Hippocratic ideas on the development and dissemination of dietetics has been the subject of scholarly investigations by Greek researchers such as Kritikos A., Bekiari A., and others [14]. In the context of our study, among recent publications, the research by Maca-Sánchez M. stands out, as it examines the development of dietary therapy in ancient medicine based on the *Corpus Hippocraticum* [15]. A comprehensive analysis of the impact of Hippocratic medicine on the development of modern perspectives in disease prevention is presented in the article *Impact of Hippocratic Medicine on the Development of Disease Observation and Prevention in Modern Medical Practice* [16]. The description of medieval dietary based on *Regimen Sanitatis Salerni* by Arnold of Villanova, are provided in the study by Zahaiska H. and others [17]. The issue of dietary nutrition and its role as a preventive and therapeutic measure, based on Cornelius Celsus' work *De Medicina*, is partially addressed in the research of Earl LeV. Crum [18]. However, Celsus' views on the impact of healthy nutrition on overall health, treatment, and the prevention of therapeutic-profile diseases require further study.

Therapeutic nutrition refers to the diet of a patient that fully meets their needs for nutrients and energy while also taking into account individual characteristics, the nature of the disease, and its stage. Even in ancient times, physicians observed that certain types of food and methods of preparation had a positive effect on the course of illnesses. The experience of ancient medical practitioners in using food for therapeutic purposes was summarized in the work of Aulus Cornelius Celsus, *De Medicina*, the first printed edition of which was published in Florence in 1478. In his work, Celsus not only summarized the views of his predecessors, whose original works were irretrievably lost, but also sought, examined, and critically analyzed certain concepts, drawing on his own practical experience in treating patients at a valetudinarium for slaves. The first book of his medical treatise is dedicated to issues of hygiene and dietetics for a healthy person. This section of the medical encyclopedia contains valuable insights not only on the effects of heat and cold, sleep and wakefulness, prolonged walking, and sea voyages on health but also includes generalizations and recommendations on dietary patterns across different seasons, drinking regimens according to both season and illness, and dietary restrictions in cases of vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain, and plague. For instance, a healthy person was advised to eat twice a day: *Bis die potius, quam semel cibum capere* (I, 1:2)¹. The primary factor in preventing

alimentary-dependent diseases was considered to be the consumption of vegetables and pickled foods at the beginning of a meal, followed by meat dishes: *Cibus a salsamentis, holeribus similibusque rebus melius incipit; tum caro adsumenda est.* (I, 1:8). Ancient physicians recommended limiting the consumption of spices. Such a diet increased the load on the gastrointestinal tract, causing discomfort, a feeling of heaviness, and constipation: *plus propter dulcedinem adsumitur, et quod modo par est, tamen aegrius concoquitur* (I, 1:9). However, modern clinical studies indicate that the inclusion of herbs and spices in the diet has a positive impact on the prevention and treatment of metabolic syndrome and related diseases [19]. Certain recommendations in the first book of the work *De Medicina* are devoted to the issue of body weight correction. In ancient society, the problem of underweight was relevant due to insufficient and unbalanced nutrition with low amounts of fats and carbohydrates, which led to health issues such as weakened immunity, gastrointestinal diseases, decreased bone density, and increased bone fragility, and so on. To achieve success in weight gain, Celsus recommended frequently consuming fatty and sweet foods and drinks in the most digestible amounts: *adsumpta per cibos et potiones maxime dulcia et pingua* (I, 3:15). Conversely, for excess body weight and obesity, he advised combining baths, hot saltwater baths, and physical activity with eating once a day, consuming sour and astringent foods, and drinking cold wine on an empty stomach: *acidiae res et austerae; et semel die adsumptae epulae; et vini non praefrigidi ieiuno potio in consuetudinem adducta* (I, 3:16). Ancient physicians repeatedly emphasized the benefits of water for the body, understanding that water is a fundamental and vital element necessary for the course of any biochemical process in the human body. In particular, insufficient fluid intake contributed to constipation: *alvum adstringit ... exigua potio* (I, 3:30), while drinking beverages during meals accelerated the passage of food through the intestines, stimulated the motility of the digestive system, and had a laxative effect: *contra solvit aucta ambulatio atque esca potusque, motus, qui post cibum est, subinde potiones cibo inmixtae* (I, 3:31). For example, Celsus recommended drinking two or three cyathi² of cold water for intestinal atony: *duos tresve cyathos per tenuem fistulam bibant* (I, 8:3), and to maintain water balance during diarrhea, he advised drinking cold water after each bowel movement: *quotiens alvus ei constiterit, frigida potione potissimum utatur* (I, 8:4). According to Celsus, the choice of diet should depend on the season, which not only influenced changes in the body's needs for

¹ The Roman numeral stands for the book, the Arabic numeral – for the chapter; after the colon – the paragraph.

² Cyathus (pl. cyathi; Lat., from Gk. κύαθος, kyathos) – Roman measure of liquids and bulk solids, approximately equal to 0.045 liters.

nutrients but also determined the availability of dietary components (I, 3: 34). The summer diet was to consist of foods that promote body cooling, boiled meat, a large amount of vegetables, and fluids: *Ei tempori aptissima sunt et caro et holus, potio quam dilutissima, ut et sitim tollat nec corpus* (I, 3: 36). In contrast, the winter diet was to provide the body with energy, strengthen immunity, and consist of calorie-dense and hearty meals. In particular, ancient physicians recommended drinking less fluid in winter, consuming more roasted meat with a small amount of vegetables, and eating foods that promote body warming: *Hieme plus esse convenit, minus sed meracius bibere; multo pane uti, carne potius elixa, modice holeribus* (I, 3: 34). In autumn, preference was to be given to fruits, while reducing calorie-dense foods in the diet: *Poma nocere ... quae inmodice toto die plerumque sic adsumuntur, ne quid ex densiore cibo remittatur* (I, 3: 34). Confirmation of this theory can also be found in the prescriptions of modern diet therapy. As researchers note, food products should be consumed not only according to the place of residence but also according to the season [6, 20].

The second book of Celsus' medical treatise is dedicated to the characteristics of the causes and symptoms of diseases, as well as recommendations for the treatment of various pathologies. Additionally, in this book, the author provides information on the nutritional value of foods, since an appropriate balance of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals ensured energy, strengthened immunity, and improved the overall condition of the human body. Thus, all types of legumes, bread, meat from cattle and wild animals, large poultry, honey, and cheese were classified as highly nutritious foods: *omnia legumina, quaeque ex frumentis panificia sunt, generis valentissimi esse ... item omne animal quadrupes domi natum; omnem grandem feram, ... omnem grandem avem, ... item mel et caseum* (II, 18:2). On the other hand, low-calorie foods included pumpkin, cucumber, capers, tree fruits, snails, oysters, and the like: *cucurbita et cucumis et capparitis, omnia poma, oleas, cochleas, itemque conculia* (II, 18:3). The frequency and regimen of food intake were of great importance in therapeutic nutrition. In particular, at the onset of an illness, Celsus recommended complete abstinence from food: *Abstinentiae vero duo genera sunt, alterum ubi nihil adsumit aeger* (II, 16:1), as this helped to alleviate inflammatory processes in the human body. These recommendations from ancient medicine are also supported by modern nutritionists and dietitians [9-11]. Even in ancient times, physicians understood that foods had different effects on the human body: some foods contributed to the formation of mucus in the body, others caused flatulence, had a diuretic or

laxative effect, and so on: ... *aliae lenes, aliae acres; aliae crassiorem pituitam in nobis faciunt, aliae tenuiorem; aliae idoneae stomacho, aliae alienae sunt; itemque aliae inflant, aliae ab hoc absunt; aliae calfaciunt, aliae refrigerant* (II, 19:1). They referred to these as foods of good or bad juice. For example, the consumption of raw eggs, rice, molasses, pearl barley, milk, bulbous plants, and glutinous dishes contributed to the formation and accumulation of mucus in the body: *Crassiorem autem pituitam faciunt ova sorbilia, halica, oriza, amulum, tisana, lac, bulbi, omniaque fere glutinosa* (II, 23:1). One of the most common causes of flatulence was considered to be the consumption of foods that stimulate gas formation. These included fatty and sweet dishes, all legumes, garlic, onions, cabbage, young wine, and the like: *Inflant autem omnia fere legumina, omnia pinguia, omnia dulcia, omnia iurulenta, mustum, ... ex holeribus alium, cepa, brassica, omnesque radices, excepto sisere et pastinaca* (II, 26:1). To cleanse the intestines, it was recommended to increase the consumption of fiber, which was found in vegetables (lettuce, undercooked cabbage, lettuce, purslane, radish, beetroot, pumpkin), fruits (cherries, mulberries, fresh grapes), and grains (barley). These foods helped cleanse the intestines and improve their motility: *At alvum movent ... brassica, ... lactuca, anteum, nasturcium, ocimum, urtica, portulaca, radícula, capparitis, alium, cepa, malva, lapatium, beta, asparagus, cucurbita, cerasia, mora, uva ex olla, omnia mitia, ficus etiam arida, sed magis viridis, uvae recentes* (II, 29:1). To achieve a diuretic effect, foods such as celery, parsnip, dill, fennel, radish, basil, mint, and hare meat were included in the diet: *Urinam autem movent ... ut apium, ruta, anetum, ocimum, menta, hysopum, anesum, coriandrum, nasturcium, eruca, feniculum; praeter haec asparagus, capparitis, nepeta, thymum, satureia, lapsanum, pastinaca, magisque agrestis, radícula, siser, cepa; ex venatione maxime lepus; vinum tenue, piper et rotundum et longum, sinapi, absinthium, nuclei pinei* (II, 31:1). Sedative, sleep-inducing, and analgesic effects were attributed to poppy, lettuce, mulberries, and leeks: *Somno vero aptum est papaver, lactuca, ... morum, porrus* (II, 32:1). During fever, it was recommended to include basil, poppy leaves, coriander, grapevine tendrils, cabbage, mashed pears and apples, quince, and wine in the diet: ... *reprimunt et refrigerant herba muralis ... serpullum, puleium, ocimum, herba sanguinalis, ... portulaca, papaveris folium, capriolique vitium, coriandrum, folia hyocimum, muscus, siser, apium, solanum, ... brassicae folia, intubus, plantago, feniculi semen; contrita pira vel mala, praecipueque Cotonea, lenticula; aqua frigida, maximeque pluvialis, vinum, acetum* (II, 33:2-3). Some principles of the influence of various foods on the human body have been adopted by modern diet therapy [3, 7-9].

The third book of Aulus Cornelius Celsus' medical treatise is dedicated to elucidating methods of treating acute and chronic diseases of a therapeutic nature. Alongside the description of traditional treatment methods in antiquity for fever, dropsy, cachexia, respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, gastrointestinal pathologies, and epilepsy, Celsus emphasizes the role of diet therapy as an essential component of the comprehensive treatment of acute and chronic diseases. This is because, where there is no therapeutic nutrition, there is no rational treatment. Thus, even ancient physicians observed that recovery occurred more quickly when certain foods were consumed compared to conventional treatment. In the acute phase of an illness, according to Celsus, one should drink water, introduce vegetables and liquid dishes into the diet, avoid consuming meat and bread, or even abstain from food and wine altogether: *facile sit non aquam tantum bibere sed etiam cibo carnem subtrahere, interdum panis quoque minus quam pro consuetudine adsumere, umidoque cibo esse contentos et holere potissimum, satisque sit tum ex toto a cibo, a vino* (III, 2:7). Thus, in the treatment of fever, one of the best remedies was considered to be a liquid diet with the addition of honey to strengthen the body: *Cibus autem febricitantibus umidus est aptissimus ... Mel quoque despumatum huic recte adicitur, quo corpus magis nutriatur* (III, 6:10). When the dynamics of the disease began to decline, it was recommended to consume small amounts of warm liquid food, namely vegetables, soups made from shellfish and lobster, and boiled meat: *uti cibo serius sunt rarius, tenui, simplici, molli, calido, exiguo, maximeque holeribus, qualia sunt lapatium, urtica, malva, vel iure etiam concharum musculorumve aut lucustarum* (III, 6:14), along with plenty of fluids before, during, or after meals: *At potio esse debet magis liberalis, et ante cibum et post hunc et cum hoc ultra quam sitis cogit* (III, 6:14). If the fever was accompanied by vomiting or diarrhea, the patient was to be given nourishing food, such as toasted bread, roasted meat, and astringent wine served warm for diarrhea and cold for vomiting: *panis tostus, caro assa, vinum austerum vel certe subausterum; si venter profluit, calidum, si sudores nocent vomitusve sunt, frigidum* (III, 6:17). In cases of mental disorders arising from fever, physicians recommended prioritizing soups and honeyed drinks: *Opus est cibo infirmo maximeque sorbitione, potione aquae mulsae* (III, 18:16). Modern principles of diet therapy following fever are partially based on Celsus' theory. As researchers note, after the normalization of body temperature, the patient is allowed to transition to regular meals with frequent consumption of warm food in small portions [3]. For gastrointestinal spasms caused by improper nutrition and accompanying stomach and intestinal diseases, a mechanically gentle

diet was prescribed, and it was recommended to limit or exclude the consumption of wine: *Cibus non multus quidem, sed saepe tamen noce ac die dandus est, ut nutriat, neque oneret* (III, 19:3). In the treatment of ascites, Celsus preferred dietary measures over medicinal therapy: *Sed id ipsum tamen moliri cibo quam medicamento melius est* (III, 21:7). He recommended consuming moderately nutritious foods, limiting fluid intake, and incorporating diuretic products into the diet: *Cibus esse debet ex media quidem materia ... potio non ultra danda est quam ut vitam sustineat, optimaque est, quae urinam movet* (III, 21:6). Ancient medicine took a comprehensive approach to treating bodily exhaustion. In cases of cachexia caused by starvation, insufficient caloric intake, or digestive disorders, physicians recommended a wholesome diet rich in beneficial substances and the inclusion of astringent wine: *Cibus vero opus est copiosis, variis, boni sicuti, ... vino austero* (III, 22:7). In cases of bodily exhaustion due to tuberculosis accompanied by fever, physicians limited food intake. During the remission phase, alongside moderate physical activity and massage, they initially included spicy dishes made from onions, garlic, chicory, and basil, prepared with vinegar, to enhance the body's resistance to infection and reduce intoxication. Later, they introduced barley soups or spelt boiled with milk, rice porridge, and similar foods: *Cibus esse debet primo acer, ut alium, porrum, idque ipsum ex aceto, vel ex eodem intubus, ocimum, lactuca, dein lenis, ut sorbitio ex tisana vel ex halica vel ex amulo, lacte adiecto. Idem oriza quoque et, ... far praestat* (III, 22:11). Additionally, to enhance the regenerative properties of the affected organs, they recommended consuming dishes made from brain tissue, small fish, and flour roasted with goat or sheep fat: *... adiciendaque quaedam ex media materia, praecipueque vel ex pruna cerebellum vel pisciculus ... Farina etiam cum sebo ovillo caprinove mixta, deinde incocta pro medicamento est* (III, 22:11). In cases of epileptic seizures, ancient physicians applied dehydration therapy and cleansing of the intestinal contents with an enema containing black hellebore. Moderately nutritious food was introduced into the diet only on the third day after the seizure, with restrictions on flour-based dishes and pork: *cibus post diem tertium ... Neque sorbitiones autem his alique molles et faciles cibi neque caro, minimeque suilla, convenit* (III, 23:3). For jaundice, after cleansing the stomach, a light diet and salted Greek wine were prioritized for the first three days. In the following three days, calorie-rich foods and meat were introduced, and the body's water balance was maintained: *triduo primo modice cibum oportet adsumere ex media materia, et vinum bibere Graecum salsum ... tum altero triduo validiores cibos, et carnis quoque aliquid esse, intra aquam manere* (III, 24:4). For elephantiasis, it was recommended to consume




low-fat, gluten-free foods that did not cause bloating, along with wine: *cibus sine pinguibus, sine glutinosis, sine infantibus* (III, 25:3). The diet of individuals suffering from paralysis was to consist of moderately calorie-rich foods, particularly game, with limited wine consumption: *Cibus esse debet ex materia media, maximeque ex venatione: potio sine vino aquae calidae* (III, 27:1).

CONCLUSIONS

Ancient medicine accumulated significant experience in treating various diseases through dietary nutrition, which included specific types of foods and methods of food preparation. As a result of analyzing the text of Celsus' work *De Medicina*, it has been established that even in ancient times, the nutrition of a sick person was considered the foundational basis upon which other therapeutic measures should be applied. Ancient physi-

cians understood that where there is no therapeutic nutrition, there is no rational treatment. The principles of using food for therapeutic purposes were based on the physiological needs of the patient's body, taking into account the stage of the disease, the season, and other factors. Dietary nutrition was aimed at reducing the risk of complications, restoring the body, and preventing diseases. The fundamental principles of ancient diet therapy were based on aligning the dietary regimen with the physiological needs of the body during illness, appropriate food processing for specific diseases, the duration of the diet depending on the characteristics of the disease's progression, maintaining water balance, and the principles of adjustment, substitution, and physical or mechanical protection of the affected system or organ. Studying the experience of past medicine sheds light on the development of diet therapy as a means of preventing and treating diseases in antiquity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Oxana V. Liubimova

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University
2 Kotsyubynsky st., 58012 Chernivtsi, Ukraine
e-mail: o.liubimova@chnu.edu.ua

ORCID AND CONTRIBUTIONSHIP

Marta J. Petryshyn: 0000-0003-4060-7440 [A](#) [B](#) [D](#) [E](#)

Halina M. Zahajska: 0000-0003-1449-0269 [A](#) [B](#) [D](#)

Oxana V. Liubimova: 0000-0003-0413-309X [A](#) [E](#) [F](#)

[A](#) – Work concept and design, [B](#) – Data collection and analysis, [C](#) – Responsibility for statistical analysis, [D](#) – Writing the article, [E](#) – Critical review, [F](#) – Final approval of the article

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