

REFeree REPORT

From academician professor Damyan Nikolov Damyanov

For Dr. Ivo Petrov Zhivkov MD, participant in a contest for associate professor for the necessity of The General Surgery Clinic of Acibadem City Clinic University Hospital.

The contest for associate professor is announced in State Paper issue 25/ 10.03.2026. The submitted documents for the contest were from only one participant Dr. Ivo Zhivkov. Born on 10.07.1985 in Sofia. He studies Medicine in Medical University of Sofia from 2004 to 2010. In 2011 he starts to work as a clinical resident of surgery in the Clinic of Endoscopic and General Surgery in PMBAL "St. Joan Krastitel" Sofia. In December of 2016 he became a surgery specialist. In 2021 he takes over the position of a deputy chief of the same clinic until 2025. In April of 2025 he has been appointed Chief surgeon on the newly formed department of General Surgery in the Clinic of Endoscopic Visceral and Bariatric Surgery in Acibadem City Clinic University Hospital.

It is essential to point out that from 2018 he works periodically as a consultant for laparoscopic, endoscopic and miniinvasive surgery for MBAL SouthWest Sandanski, UMBAL Medica Rousse and from 2023 for MBAL MedLine Plovdiv.

From 2017 he has an acknowledged surgical specialty. In 2015 he has been enrolled as PhD student for Medical University of Pleven, where in 2017 defends a dissertation with a topic Place and role of the laparoscopic revision of the bile ducts in the diagnostic and treatment of benign extrahepatic lithiasis, and becomes a PhD.

To participate in the contest Dr. Zhivkov has presented:

1. A treatise with subject "Technical aspects in the laparoscopic revision of the bile ducts" published in 2026. In 148 pages the author defines the laparoscopic revision of the bile ducts as a new more complicated, technical and innovative phase in the biliary surgery. Two important premises are highlighted for a successful surgery in this new higher stage- a good knowledge of the surgical laparoscopic anatomy, adequate ability in the conventional and laparoscopic techniques. The use of every preoperative diagnostic method in the pathology of the bile ducts has to be supplemented with intraoperative diagnostics with which we have made the first technological and innovative breakthrough. Dr. Zhivkov describes and employs a range of techniques, including intraoperative cholangiography, intraoperative ultrasonography, intraoperative cholangioscopy, as well as catheters for biliary tract exploration and dilation. These methods provide additional opportunities for identifying vascular and biliary anatomical variations and anomalies, the recognition of which significantly reduces the risk of intraoperative errors. A second major technological advance has been the expansion of the armamentarium of surgical instruments and adjunctive devices, together with improvements in the technical execution of surgical procedures. In this regard, Dr. Zhivkov describes and utilizes various catheters, irrigation techniques, the Fogarty catheter, the Dormia basket, drainage techniques, and, when indicated, biliary suturing and surgical manipulations of the papilla of Vater. The monograph is timely, well substantiated, scientifically valuable, and of considerable practical relevance.

2. Scientific Publications – A total of 41 publications, distributed as follows:

- Indicator B4: 13 articles published in English-language journals indexed in internationally recognized bibliographic databases. This is documented by the reported impact factor of each journal, provided in a separate appendix.
- Indicator G8: 25 full-text articles published in non-indexed journals or edited collective volumes.
- Indicator G9: Chapters published in one monograph and in two consensus statements of the Bulgarian Surgical Society, issued as independent books serving as guidelines for good surgical practice.

Fourteen publications are devoted to hepatobiliary and pancreatic surgery, reflecting Dr. Zhivkov's scientific and clinical interests in biliary tract diseases, with particular emphasis on the laparoscopic management of hepatolithiasis and choledocholithiasis. Six of these articles have been published in English.

Three publications compare endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) with laparoscopic exploration of the extrahepatic bile ducts in the management of choledocholithiasis and acute cholecystitis. Individual publications address laparoscopic techniques for common bile duct stone extraction, the laparoscopic management of previously unrecognized ductal lithiasis, and laparoscopic dissection of the common bile duct and the surrounding anatomical region as prerequisites for safe and successful biliary exploration.

It is particularly noteworthy that the national surgical community entrusted Dr. Zhivkov and his co-authors with preparing the section of the Bulgarian Surgical Society Guidelines on Biliary Surgery dealing with the preoperative and intraoperative assessment of the extrahepatic bile ducts and the surgical management of choledocholithiasis and biliary hypertension.

Three English-language publications present the Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS) protocol for optimized postoperative recovery following laparoscopic exploration of the hepatobiliary tract. Additional individual reports address laparoscopic cholecystectomy in patients with decompensated biliary cirrhosis, strategies for preventing and managing complications associated with this procedure, laparoscopic treatment of complex biliodigestive fistulas, and the important issue of surgeons performing ERCP within surgical departments—a practice that had previously faced artificial professional barriers.

This body of work is further complemented by a publication describing laparoscopic techniques in the management of acute pancreatitis and by a study on the application of the DIAMOND technique for hepatic metastases from rectal carcinoma, aimed at facilitating subsequent hepatic resection. Ten publications address diseases of the gastrointestinal tract (GIT), two of which have been published in English. In the field of upper gastrointestinal surgery, these include one publication on the laparoscopic treatment of achalasia, two on laparoscopic repair of hiatal hernia, and one describing the technique of lymph node dissection in gastric carcinoma.

The section devoted to lower gastrointestinal surgery includes one publication on laparoscopic appendectomy and two articles on rectal prolapse, addressing its clinical assessment and the selection of the optimal treatment strategy through a comparison of laparoscopic, conventional open, and perineal surgical approaches. Dr. Zhivkov has been among the pioneers in introducing transanal endoscopic microsurgery (TEM) for the treatment of early-stage (Stage I and II) rectal carcinoma, including in patients over 75 years of age.

A separate group comprises six publications on the surgical treatment of morbid obesity, five of which have been published in English. These papers discuss the laparoscopic gastric plication technique and its potential complications, operative strategy and technical aspects, as well as the implementation of the Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS) protocol for accelerated postoperative rehabilitation and the importance of specialized perioperative nursing care.

Two publications are devoted to the management of hernias. One presents the authors' clinical experience with the use of ProGrip™ mesh, while the other is a chapter in a consensus guideline of the Bulgarian Surgical Society, in which Dr. Zhivkov co-authored the section discussing specific techniques for the repair of ventral hernias of varying size.

Two additional articles present the author's views on contemporary controversial issues in surgery. The first concerns Natural Orifice Transluminal Endoscopic Surgery (NOTES), expressing a balanced position regarding its limited indications and cautioning against its indiscriminate adoption. The second evaluates the benefits of the Fast-Track (Enhanced Recovery) approach for early postoperative oral feeding and patient mobilization.

Three publications describe noteworthy clinical case reports, including a giant abdominal fibroleiomyoma, Dunbar syndrome, and the laparoscopic treatment of a splenic artery aneurysm.

Scientific and Practical Contributions of Dr. Ivo Zhivkov's Publications

1. Introduction of laparoscopic exploration of the extrahepatic bile ducts as a routine procedure in minimally invasive biliary surgery.
2. Demonstration of the comparable efficacy of laparoscopic exploration of the extrahepatic bile ducts and endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP), highlighting the advantages of the single-stage laparoscopic approach.
3. Implementation of Enhanced Recovery After Surgery (ERAS) protocols to promote faster and more comprehensive recovery following abdominal surgical procedures, particularly in hepatobiliary surgery and bariatric surgery.
4. Contribution to the introduction and establishment of transanal endoscopic microsurgery (TEM) for the treatment of early rectal cancer and premalignant rectal lesions.

5. Contribution to the establishment of laparoscopic surgery as a standard treatment modality for a wide range of benign conditions, including acute appendicitis, morbid obesity, achalasia, ventral, inguinal and hiatal hernias, cholelithiasis, rectal prolapse, early-stage rectal carcinoma, and other surgical diseases.

On this basis, Dr. Zhivkov has achieved the following scientometric indicators:

A1. Doctoral Dissertation – 50 points

B3. Habilitation Thesis – 100 points

B4. Scientific Publications in Peer-Reviewed Journals – 178 points

G8. Publications and Conference Papers in Non-Peer-Reviewed Journals and Edited Volumes – 264 points

An additional 80 points should be credited for citations, comprising: one citation in a peer-reviewed journal, five citations in peer-reviewed monographs and edited volumes, and three citations in non-peer-reviewed journals. Documentary evidence of these citations has been provided, together with a table listing the impact factors of the journals in which the candidate's publications have appeared.

It can be stated with confidence that Dr. Ivo Zhivkov substantially exceeds the minimum scientometric requirements established under Article 26, paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (ASDRBA) for appointment to the academic position of Associate Professor in Professional Field 7. *Healthcare and Sports*.

I would also like to emphasize Dr. Zhivkov's strong commitment to mastering both innovative and well-established surgical techniques in his personal clinical practice and within the surgical department in which he works. This is evidenced by the submitted record of 16 postgraduate training courses and fellowships completed between 2011 and 2024, including training in: the fundamentals of laparoscopic surgery (Bulgaria); advanced laparoscopic upper and subsequently lower gastrointestinal surgery (United Kingdom); bariatric surgery and sleeve gastrectomy (Romania); abdominal wall and hernia surgery (Serbia and Türkiye); and hepatopancreatobiliary surgery (Sofia, Israel, Slovenia, and Austria).

Dr. Zhivkov was among the young surgeons who successfully challenged the traditional gastroenterology monopoly over therapeutic endoscopy by acquiring expertise in upper and lower gastrointestinal endoscopy through specialized training courses in Varna and the Czech Republic, as well as in endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) in Germany. These additional competencies have substantially expanded his diagnostic and therapeutic capabilities and significantly increased the value of his contribution to the clinical departments in which he practices.

The required supporting documentation has been submitted, including diplomas certifying the completion of a medical degree (2010), specialty certification in General Surgery (2016), a Master's degree in Health Management (2016), and the

educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) (2017). An additional strength of his professional profile is his training at the Duke Clinical Research Institute (Germany, 2012), together with certification in Good Clinical Practice (GCP) obtained during 2013–2014.

Dr. Zhivkov has also participated in undergraduate teaching activities whenever opportunities have been available. The submitted documentation includes:

- A certificate issued by the Yordanka Filaretova Medical College, Medical University – Sofia, confirming his teaching activities during the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 academic years (winter and summer semesters), comprising 130 hours of lectures, 65 hours of practical training, and 57.42 hours of examination duties.
- A certificate from Medica University Hospital, Ruse, confirming the delivery of four lectures, each lasting two clock hours, on topics in abdominal surgery.
- Two certificates documenting his participation as an instructor in laparoscopic surgery courses conducted in 2024 and 2025 at the Telecommunication Endoscopic Center of the Medical University – Pleven, signed by the Rector of the University.

Accordingly, the required teaching workload of 200 academic hours during the preceding two academic years has been fully satisfied. This educational activity demonstrates the candidate's ability and willingness to impart knowledge to both students and colleagues, while also highlighting his effectiveness and appeal as a lecturer and educator.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Ivo Zhivkov is 41 years of age and has accumulated 15 years of surgical experience. He has held the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) since 2017. Throughout his career, he has gained extensive experience in both elective and emergency surgery, performing conventional and laparoscopic surgical procedures as well as diagnostic and therapeutic gastrointestinal endoscopic interventions.

Dr. Zhivkov is highly regarded by both patients and colleagues and is frequently sought after as a consulting surgeon. In addition to his clinical duties at his primary institution, he provides specialist consultations to surgical departments and clinics in Plovdiv, Ruse, Sandanski, Petrich, and Kyustendil. He is a member of the Bulgarian Surgical Society (BSS), the European Association for Endoscopic Surgery (EAES), and the European Society of Surgical Oncology (ESSO).

In the present competition for the academic position of Associate Professor, Dr. Zhivkov has submitted a body of scientific work that fully complies with the statutory requirements and has fulfilled the required teaching workload. He has established himself as a dynamic and highly active surgeon with substantial clinical responsibilities and a strong commitment to patient care and professional excellence. He is a collegial physician who serves as a source of inspiration and mentorship for younger surgeons, as well as an effective lecturer and educator. His pronounced

interest in innovative surgical techniques has been complemented by extensive international professional training and collaboration.

In view of the above, Dr. Ivo Petrov Zhivkov fully satisfies all requirements for appointment to the academic position of Associate Professor. I therefore strongly recommend to the Scientific Jury that Dr. Ivo Petrov Zhivkov be elected Associate Professor for the needs of the Department of Surgery at Acibadem City Clinic University Hospital.

26.06.2026

Professor Damyan Nikolov Damyanov:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "D. Damyanov", with a stylized flourish at the end.