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Literature review

Addiction treatments in Ecuador: a fierce struggle to implement ethics, bioethics and morality

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Treatments for dependencies in Ecuador: a fierce fight to implement ethics, bioethics and morals

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SUMMARY

In Ecuador, there is a growing proliferation of private "Specialized Addiction Treatment Centers" because the State's infrastructure is insufficient. These establishments have led to serious allegations of human rights violations and breaches of bioethical standards. The purpose of this study is to analyze the ethical and human rights performance in mental health within these "treatments." This literature



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review explored 70 articles, selecting the 31 most relevant ones published between 2017 and 2023 from the following databases: Scielo, MEDLINE, Dialnet, Psycodoc, and PsycArticles. The findings highlight that the State must actively assume responsibility for drug addiction rehabilitation processes, as the proliferation of private centers has become a lucrative business that violates constitutional norms and bioethical parameters. The study concludes that, in the health sector, violations of deontological, ethical, and human rights codes undermine bioethical standards.

Keywords: Addiction; Bioethics; Human rights; Treatment.

ABSTRACT

In Ecuador, there is a growing private proliferation of “Specialized Addiction Treatment Centers,” as the State lacks sufficient infrastructure. These establishments face serious allegations of human rights violations and breaches of bioethical standards. The aim of this paper is to analyze ethical performance and human rights conditions in the context of mental health within these “treatments.” This literature review examined 70 articles, selecting the 31 most relevant, published between 2017 and 2023, from databases such as Scielo, MEDLINE, Dialnet, Psycodoc, and PsycArticles. The findings highlight the need for the State to take an active role in rehabilitation processes for drug dependency, as the proliferation of private centers has become a business venture where constitutional norms and bioethical parameters are being violated. It is concluded that, in terms of health, the breach of deontological, ethical, and human rights codes goes against bioethical standards.

Keywords: Addiction; Bioethics; Human rights; Treatment.

SUMMARY

In Ecuador, there is a growing private proliferation of “Specialized Dependency Treatment Centers”, due to the insufficiency of state infrastructure. These establishments face serious complaints for violations of human rights and bioethical standards. The objective of this work is to analyze the ethical performance and human rights in the context of mental health within these “treatments”. This bibliographic review examined 70 articles, selecting the 31 most relevant published between 2017 and



2023 in the databases: Scielo, MEDLINE, Dialnet, Psycodoc and PsycArticles. The results highlight that the State must actively assume the rehabilitation processes for drug dependence, since the proliferation of private centers turns into a business where constitutional norms and bioethical parameters are violated. It is concluded that, in the health field, the violation of deontological, ethical and human rights codes directly affects bioethical principles.

Key words: Dependence; Bioethics; human rights; Treatment.

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Introduction

Involvement in human rights and ethics is a topic that any individual can address throughout their life and at the stage they deem most appropriate; however, there are elements present that seek a common denominator: respect for the social environment, and the promotion of human dignity and equality.⁽¹⁾ Checa's doctoral research work,⁽²⁾ It highlights the comprehensive training that man should have, and the importance of ethical and deontological development in the daily actions of the people who inhabit this planet. In this sense, it is crucial to emphasize that when intervening in areas of health, such as mental health, specifically within the context of addictions, "in theory", ethics, morality and bioethics are basic structures that form the pillars of psychotherapy and the deontology of the professional actions of specialists in this field, and should never, under any circumstances, be bifurcated or biased.

From Santano's perspective,⁽³⁾ The phenomena of globalization have brought with them ideas linked to the importance of freedom of thought, democracy, human rights, and the continuous growth of diverse societies, which is currently framed within the inviolability of human dignity as the main prerequisite for social development. Zabala & Isea,⁽⁴⁾ They emphasize that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights



seeks respect for a series of universal values, which are aimed at providing protection to human beings, so that they can be equal to their fellow human beings anywhere in the world, and through these mechanisms, people can achieve their fulfillment and full happiness.

Among the components necessary for the proper functioning of social structures and mechanisms, the ethical training and conduct of professionals in various fields of knowledge stand out. The optimal performance of any expert in the workplace must be supported by three factors: a strong sense of responsibility, a deep-rooted commitment to their actions, and finally, conceptual transparency.⁽⁵⁾ In this regard, San Sebastián & Idareta,⁽⁶⁾ They emphasize the need for proper professional conduct within the current context, highlighting the scientific branches that have a direct influence on society.

Pérez,⁽⁷⁾ In his work on values and ethics from a psychological perspective, he argues that these elements are linked to social, historical, and temporal contexts, and clarifies that there are no universal principles, as these depend largely on the cultural, socioeconomic, and political characteristics of each society. From another perspective, he emphasizes that, within the field of health, there are deontological and ethical considerations that define respect, commitments, care, and the type of attention given to other human beings—a science known as bioethics.⁽⁸⁾

Sanchez,⁽⁹⁾ In her work on ethics, mental health, addictions, and social exclusion, she mentions that the first parameter for an appropriate approach in the field of substance abuse is the rights of the people receiving treatment and the ethical principles present in each of the therapeutic approaches. Tarqui,⁽¹⁰⁾ In another study on bioethics and human rights in the context of addiction, the elimination of all types of coercive and punitive strategies, or any act that threatens a person's integrity or affects universal rights, is presented as a determining factor in the clinical approach. This begins with the individual's autonomy to decide on matters concerning their own physical and mental health. According to Trujillo,⁽¹¹⁾ Human beings must direct their efforts towards creating an equitable society, where the values of coexistence, respect, and ethical action regarding community and personal decisions are exalted, and where government interventions originate from the needs of the most urgent sectors, based on their research with drug addicts in conditions of begging.

On the other hand, Benítez et al.,⁽¹²⁾ Within their proposal on drug addiction and bioethics, they raise several crucial points. The first concerns diagnostic criteria involving a thorough and accurate evaluation, free from bias on the part of the examiner and without professional or cultural barriers—a fact intimately linked to deontological and ethical factors. Secondly, they identify certain elements of discrimination, marginalization, or stigmatization, which would violate the principle of justice. Alarmingly, these conditions have been observed in "professional practice" within the field of mental health, and even more so in the treatment of drug addicts.

Authors such as Liberatore & Bogetti,⁽¹³⁾ They highlight the importance of bioethics and its impact on the relationship with life. In the specific field of psychology and psychiatry, there are a series of ethical considerations that mental health professionals must ensure are fully complied with, as they are responsible for the confidentiality of psycho-affective elements capable of generating ambivalent emotional states, repressed situations, traumas, and even serving as a source of catharsis and leading to a "therapeutic cure." Bertolín,⁽¹⁴⁾ It highlights the crucial role of ethical conduct in any healthcare intervention, noting the existence of international and national ethical codes that must be respected and, if violated, sanctioned according to established laws. In the case of psychology and psychiatry, it states that the actions of these specialists must be closely monitored, as in the case of Spain, where exemplary sanctions have been imposed for malpractice.

In Ecuador, addiction treatment programs have, since their inception, generated numerous extremely serious allegations of human rights violations, constitutional breaches, and violations of ethical codes. These acts have even resulted in countless deaths within what are currently called "Specialized Treatment Centers for People with Problematic Alcohol and Other Drug Use" (CETAD). Despite the creation of autonomous and sanctioning bodies such as the Agency for Quality Assurance of Health Services and Prepaid Medicine (ACESS), the Ecuadorian state has failed to regulate these practices. In theory, and according to current health regulations, ACESS has the authority to work in conjunction with other state entities and to take corrective action against establishments or healthcare professionals who commit human rights violations or breach regulations.



Based on this brief background, the purpose of this work includes an analysis of addiction treatments in Ecuador, a fierce struggle to implement ethics, bioethics and morality.

Methods

A systematic literature review was conducted to develop a critical and reflective analysis of the content of documents on the topic. This study constitutes a descriptive documentary exploration; doctoral and master's theses, original articles, and review articles published between 2005 and 2021 in Spanish and English were considered. The search was carried out in the databases Scielo, MEDLINE, Dialnet, Psycodoc, PsycArticles, and Google Scholar from January 2021 to March 2022.

Development

The present study constitutes a descriptive documentary exploration, following parameters set forth by Rubio & Gleason,⁽¹⁵⁾ Those who emphasize that this type of research contributes to cognitive learning processes and also facilitates the understanding of theoretical elements. Del Pino,⁽¹⁶⁾ It presents bibliographic studies as excellent pedagogical resources for promoting various academic development processes. Furthermore, the parameters proposed by Barros & Turpo were considered for carrying out the documentary exploratory procedure.⁽¹⁷⁾ They initially establish that the researcher must initiate a systematic search, and subsequently classify the information according to its usefulness and consistency with the topic discussed.

The databases searched were: Scielo, MEDLINE, Dialnet, Psycodoc, and PsycArticles, in addition to texts published and available in institutional repositories of higher education institutions and major Ecuadorian media outlets such as Diario El Universo, El Comercio, and La Hora. As part of the selection process, only publications from 2017 to 2023 were considered. The keywords used were: addiction, bioethics, human rights, and treatment. The search strategies focused on “ethics in addictions,”



“deontology and mental health,” and “residential treatments and bioethical factors.” To broaden the scope of the search, the same criteria were applied in English.

A filter was applied to all studies that, despite having some relation to the topics explored, maintained conceptualizations distant from the proposed theme. Based on these research guidelines, 70 works in Spanish and English were obtained, of which 31 were selected, as the information contained in this selection presented a direct theoretical link, including 6 doctoral dissertations with studies directly related to the research. It is essential to note that the parameters for the selection of this material were rooted in explorations that indicate the relevance and importance of maintaining ethical, bioethical, and moral considerations when providing psychotherapy to patients who use psychoactive substances (PAS), a responsibility that is even greater when intervening with female populations, especially adolescents, who show greater susceptibility and a tendency toward manipulation due to certain sexual behaviors and other pathologies.

The inviolability of human rights and bioethical norms within therapeutic intervention processes for drug addicts

García's doctoral thesis,⁽¹⁸⁾It highlights that the biopsychosocial model is currently the most cutting-edge approach to addressing substance abuse, comprised of a series of interacting elements. This perspective allows for a holistic understanding of the individual. Based on these parameters, professional interventions must adhere to high ethical standards, and the problem must be addressed from a purely humanistic standpoint.

Within the field of drug addiction, there are situations and circumstances, such as interventions with female populations or those with diverse sexual orientations, that test academic and experiential preparation, as well as internalized ethical values, which will ultimately be reflected in the bioethical actions of the various health specialists. Precisely in these environments, the life stories of each individual, in a high percentage of cases, are filled with traumatic and punitive elements, with histories of gender-based and domestic violence and sexual abuse. These data are corroborated by the

prevalence rates among women who use drugs versus women who do not, based on various studies in South America and Europe. (19)

Machado,⁽²⁰⁾In his doctoral work, he positions Schwartz's Theory of Values as the fundamental axis for understanding the actions of various social science professionals. He emphasizes this approach because it allows for the visualization of cultural, social, and personality elements. Pastor adds to these components,⁽²¹⁾He notes that clinical psychologists and psychiatrists must possess, within their training, an introspective exploration, that is, to carry out an internal reflective process, which allows them to first solve their own conflicts if they exist, and to identify their sociocultural, emotional and even spiritual limitations.

Substance abuse is classified as a mental health disorder and necessarily requires family intervention, as well as a thorough examination of the client's or patient's immediate environment. In this regard, professionals involved in substance abuse rehabilitation processes have an unwavering commitment to the ethical handling of information obtained from these sources and must never use it for their own benefit or that of others—a common mistake in institutions offering treatment in isolation, where involvement with family members and other entirely reprehensible acts have been observed.⁽²²⁾

The work of Martínez et al.,⁽²³⁾It presents that there are currently a number of medical elements that need to be corrected and others that need to be reinforced within traditional hospital care, which is structured by a series of organizational parameters and health service offerings. These aspects hinder a relevant community approach that prioritizes the human factor and the ethical management of cases. Within this framework, it is mentioned that, according to a newspaper report in Diario la Hora,⁽²⁴⁾Ecuador invests nine times less than the rest of the South American countries in mental health, which reflects serious deficiencies within its health structure. In addition, there are no more than 15 state-run addiction treatment centers, which has led to the proliferation of a series of businesses with and without operating permits, turning "addiction rehabilitation" into truly lucrative centers, with serious breaches of bioethical precepts, human rights, and even violations of constitutional norms, such as deprivation of liberty without a court order.

The Ecuadorian reality regarding “private addiction treatments”

Flores & Rivas,⁽²⁵⁾In their investigative report on Ecuador's CETADs (Centers for the Treatment of Addictions), they critically expose the series of tortures, humiliations, and human rights violations that have been present for years in these establishments, both authorized and clandestine. These acts have gone largely unpunished, let alone eradicated, resulting in physical and psychological abuse being presented as the primary "therapeutic mechanisms," often with the approval of "healthcare professionals." Within this context, it is important to note that there have been no exemplary sanctions in the history of "addiction rehabilitation" in Ecuador, neither for the staff nor the owners of these "businesses." The Ecuadorian press itself reports on acts of corruption; centers are closed only to reopen with the same owners and team of "professionals," just under a different name and in a different location. As for the ethical conduct, it leaves much to be desired, since evidently almost all those admitted in residential mode do not sign the "informed consent" until they have been "rescued", which in reality is a kidnapping in the light of the authorities who protect "human rights" and "justice". El Universo newspaper,⁽²⁶⁾In his exploratory work on the death of 18 inmates within an “addiction rehabilitation center” in the city of Guayaquil, he exposes the deficient performance of Ecuadorian state entities such as Human Rights, ACESS and the Ministry of Public Health, and also indicates the series of violations of freedom and the right to free choice about the health of Ecuadorians, since these people with alleged addictions were forced into confinement without a prior diagnosis.

Another event within the field of “addiction treatment” that demonstrates the pronounced problem of human rights violations, constitutional norms, and breaches of bioethical and deontological criteria, is reflected in the report from Spain in the newspaper El País.⁽²⁷⁾Well, in March of this year, seven young people between the ages of 18 and 25 died burned alive inside a CETAD in the Guayas Province.

The profound and courageous investigation by Flores & Rivas,⁽²⁸⁾In their journalistic report on "torture as therapy," they alarmingly reveal that a large number of private CETADs (Centers for the Treatment of Addictions) in Ecuador not only offer addiction treatment but also "correct" behavioral problems, homosexuality, infidelity, and other issues such as rebelliousness and infidelity. Their findings demonstrate that these individuals were "interned" against their will and without prior diagnosis. The



complaints from LGBTIQ+ groups are just the tip of an iceberg, highlighting a much larger problem related to abuses of human dignity and freedom. They further state that currently, "invasive and aversive treatments" are being used to violate privacy, with the aim of forcing individuals to change their lifestyles.

The work of Intriago & Moreira,⁽²⁹⁾ They show that in Ecuador there is a regulation that governs centers that provide addiction treatment (Ministerial Agreement 080), and the Agency for Quality Assurance of Health Services and Prepaid Medicine (ACESS) is the body responsible for ensuring compliance with this regulation and the inviolability of human rights, in addition to being the entity that sanctions health professionals in case of violation of bioethical regulations, and that, to work in these establishments, they must "in theory", have signed a commitment to the inviolability of the human rights of patients, as stipulated by Health Regulation 080.

However, these facts have not been made visible in the Ecuadorian reality, as Flores & Rivas,⁽²⁵⁾ They show that the CETADs that have been closed are reopened under a different name, with the same owner, and the same team of "professionals," and all these reprehensible procedures that occur in private establishments have gone unpunished and without corrective action, since in state-run establishments there is full compliance with the regulations.

Regarding Ecuadorian government policies in the field of drug addiction, Cevallos & Alvarado,⁽³⁰⁾ In summary, this health crisis is currently considered a socio-economic phenomenon with a public health focus, which requires intervention from all state agencies focused on a fundamental axis: respect for and compliance with human rights, which unfortunately does not happen in reality, as the events that occurred in Ecuador demonstrate the magnitude of the abuses that are experienced in these underworlds.

Specifically, within addiction treatment processes, there are two crucial elements for a proper approach and compliance with bioethical regulations. The first focuses on respect for the individual's rights, which under no circumstances can be disregarded. In this regard, Ministerial Agreement 080 stipulates that for residential treatment to take place, informed consent must first be signed, and, in theory, admission must be based on a diagnosis demonstrating substance dependence. The second mechanism is a legal



order from a competent authority, demonstrating that the individual has endangered their own life or the lives of others, or has demonstrated an inability to control drug use, based on a multidisciplinary diagnostic assessment.⁽³¹⁾

Hansen, (19) refutes all types of physical or psychological aggression within addiction treatments, and states that among the main ethical aspects that mental health professionals should respect in their clients are: self-esteem, personality characteristics, religious and personal beliefs, the subject's own sociocultural elements, among the main ones, with the Ecuadorian reality being very distant.

Conclusions

The main findings of this research establish that, in the field of mental health, codes of ethics, ethical principles, and respect for human rights are elements that all professionals must fully comply with; any violation of these aspects constitutes an action that contravenes bioethical norms. The study highlights the lack of oversight and sanctions by Ecuadorian regulatory bodies for CETADs (Centers for the Treatment of Addictions). Furthermore, it identifies a problem involving healthcare professionals who permit a series of acts that violate human dignity, mental well-being, and the right to free choice and responsibility for one's own life for consumers—phenomena that have gone unpunished. In this context, a "normalization of these extremely serious violations" is evident.

In summary, Ministerial Agreement 080 aims to regulate therapeutic practices and proper bioethical conduct. However, it is not fully implemented, and there is no apparent coordination with other state entities responsible for upholding human rights and ethical standards. Ultimately, it is concluded that the Ecuadorian state must actively assume responsibility for drug rehabilitation programs, as the proliferation of private centers has become a lucrative business that violates constitutional norms and human rights, and rarely adheres to bioethical parameters.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Authorship contribution



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