



Forum: World Health Organisation (WHO)

Issue: The question of establishing new guidelines for addiction rehabilitation

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Introduction

Addiction is a serious problem that impacts countless people and their families, causing issues in mental and physical health, relationships, and even jobs. It's a tough cycle that many struggle to break, often leading to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. While there are many rehab programs available, most don't really cater to everyone's unique needs, resulting in high rates of relapse. According to the UNODC, approximately 35 million people worldwide suffer from substance use disorders, highlighting the urgent need for effective support systems.

Right now, the way we treat addiction is all over the place. Different programs use different methods, and this lack of consistency can make it hard for people to get the help they truly need. The UNODC emphasises that many treatment approaches are outdated or insufficient, especially in the face of new substances and changing patterns of use. We need fresh, updated guidelines that can tackle these challenges effectively.

This report will highlight the need for new guidelines for addiction rehabilitation to better support those trying to overcome their struggles. By closely examining what's working and what isn't in current practices, we can suggest better ways to help individuals on their recovery journey. The upcoming sections will cover the current state of addiction treatment, the reasons why new guidelines are necessary and specific ideas for improvement that could really make a difference.

Background Information

Addiction is a complex and intricate issue that affects individuals across all demographics and cultures. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines substance use disorder (SUD) as a medical condition characterised by an individual's inability to control their use of a substance, despite its negative effects on their



life. This encompasses a wide range of substances, including alcohol, prescription medications, and illicit drugs. The rise of new synthetic opioids, along with an unprecedented supply and demand for other drugs, has intensified the effects of the global drug problem. This has increased drug use disorders and environmental damage, as highlighted in the World Drug Report 2024 released by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). In 2022, the total number of drug users reached 292 million, marking a 20 percent increase over the past decade.

The consequences of addiction are extensive, impacting not only the individual but also their families, communities, and society at large. Health issues associated with addiction include an increased risk of mental health disorders, chronic diseases, and infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis, often exacerbated by risky behaviours. Socially, addiction can lead to family breakdown, unemployment, and increased crime rates, creating a cycle of hardship that is difficult to escape. The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), a key UN body, emphasises the importance of comprehensive approaches to drug use and addiction, advocating for policies that promote public health and human rights.

Current rehabilitation approaches vary significantly, with many programs lacking evidence-based practices tailored to individual needs. While some methodologies focus on detoxification and abstinence, others incorporate holistic and therapeutic strategies. However, a common issue is the absence of standardized guidelines that ensure consistency and quality of care. The World Health Assembly, another vital UN entity, has called for strengthened health systems to improve treatment accessibility and effectiveness.

Moreover, the misconceptions associated with addiction often discourage individuals from seeking help. These misunderstandings frame addiction as a moral failing rather than a complex health issue. Consequently, many individuals do not receive the necessary support or treatment, further complicating their journey to recovery. This lack of understanding perpetuates barriers to access, highlighting the need for public education initiatives and awareness campaigns endorsed by the UN and its agencies.

Given these challenges, the need for new, comprehensive guidelines for addiction rehabilitation has never been more critical. By establishing evidence-based practices that are adaptable to diverse populations, we can enhance treatment effectiveness and ultimately improve recovery rates. The collaboration between other various UN committees, including the UNODC, and CND, will be essential in creating a cohesive framework for addiction treatment that prioritizes health, dignity, and recovery for all individuals.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

- United States of America:** One of the largest contributors to global addiction research and treatment practices, given its significant rates of substance use disorders, particularly related to opioids and alcohol. With a broad network of rehab programs across the country, the U.S. is at the forefront of advocating for new and improved addiction treatment standards.
- Portugal:** A global leader in progressive drug policy, having decriminalized all drugs in 2001. Since then, the country has focused on a harm reduction approach that combines drug decriminalization with robust addiction rehabilitation services. Portugal's success in reducing drug-related deaths and HIV transmission has been attributed to its model, which offers comprehensive treatment, social reintegration programs, and harm reduction strategies. This model has been cited as a blueprint for other countries.
- Commission on Narcotic Drugs:** CND works to ensure the implementation of international drug control policies, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and human-rights-oriented approaches to drug addiction treatment.
- World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH):** Advocates for the inclusion of mental health in addiction treatment programs, emphasizing that effective rehabilitation must address both psychological and physical aspects of addiction. The WFMH has supported the integration of mental health services into addiction treatment policies, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1940's - 1950's	Organisations like WHO began recognising substance use disorder (SUD) as a medical condition. This paved the way for addiction to be seen as a health issue requiring scientific and medical approaches.
1956	American Medical Association (AMA) officially recognized alcoholism as a disease, which had a significant influence on the

	international movement to frame addiction as a medical condition.
1946	The CND was formally established to coordinate international efforts to combat drug abuse and trafficking. The Commission played an important role in advocating for treatment policies focused on prevention and rehabilitation
2010	The World Health Organization (WHO) published guidelines for the treatment of alcohol use disorder. These guidelines marked one of the first global attempts to standardize treatment for addiction.
June 2001	The United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) took place, where global leaders agreed to shift drug policy towards public health approaches, emphasizing rehabilitation and harm reduction strategies. This was a turning point for how the world viewed addiction treatment.
November 2016	WHO released its updated guidelines for the treatment of substance use disorders, reflecting the evolving landscape of addiction, particularly in response to the rise of synthetic opioids and other emerging substances.
March 2018	The UNODC launched its International Standards for the Treatment of Drug Use Disorders, which provided a comprehensive framework for addiction treatment policies worldwide.
March 2021	The World Health Organization called for the development of new global guidelines on addiction rehabilitation, stressing the need to update practices based on current evidence, emerging substances, and contemporary challenges.



Challenges and Obstacles

- **Emerging Substances:** New, potent drugs like synthetic opioids challenge current treatment models, requiring specialized approaches.
- **Limited Access to Treatment and Resources:** Many regions, especially low-income and middle-income countries, lack resources and trained professionals to provide adequate care.
- **Negative Perceptions of Addiction:** Addiction is often viewed as a moral failing rather than a medical condition. These negative perceptions discourage individuals from seeking treatment and perpetuate discrimination, making recovery more difficult.
- **Co-occurring Mental Health Disorders:** Individuals with addiction also face mental health disorders, but most programs don't address both, hindering recovery.
- **Fragmented Policies:** Inconsistent drug policies across nations create disparities in treatment availability and effectiveness.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The 2001 UNGASS marked a pivotal moment in global drug policy. The session resulted in a shift from punitive approaches to a focus on public health, rehabilitation, and harm reduction. Countries were encouraged to prioritize treatment and support over criminalization. Despite this, many nations continue to use outdated, punitive methods, which can hinder progress in addiction rehabilitation.

In 2001, Portugal decriminalized the possession of all drugs, shifting focus to harm reduction and rehabilitation. As a result, drug-related deaths in Portugal dropped by 80%, and HIV transmission through injection drug use decreased by 65% (UNODC, 2024). The model has been widely praised as a success and is often cited as a blueprint for other countries. However, while it has been effective, implementing this approach on a global scale has faced resistance due to political and cultural barriers.

The WHO first published global guidelines for the treatment of alcohol use disorder in 1995, with updates in 2016 that incorporated approaches to newer substances like synthetic opioids. These guidelines aimed to standardize treatment and improve care. However, the application of these guidelines has been

inconsistent, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where resources and infrastructure for addiction treatment are limited.

Countries like Norway have integrated mental health services into addiction treatment, recognizing that many individuals struggling with addiction also face co-occurring mental health disorders. This holistic approach has proven effective in improving treatment outcomes. However, integrating mental health care into addiction treatment remains a challenge in many regions, particularly in low-income countries where mental health resources are scarce.

Possible Solutions

- **Harm Reduction and Decriminalization:** Expanding harm reduction policies, like those in Portugal, can reduce drug-related harm. Implementing supervised consumption spaces and focusing on treatment rather than punishment can improve public health outcomes.
- **Updated Global Guidelines:** New, evidence-based guidelines should be developed and regularly updated to address emerging substances and global trends. These guidelines should standardize addiction treatment worldwide, ensuring consistency, especially in low-resource settings.
- **Integrating Mental Health Services:** A holistic approach that addresses both addiction and co-occurring mental health disorders can significantly improve recovery. Programs should integrate mental health care alongside addiction treatment to provide comprehensive support.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Combating stigma by educating the public about addiction as a medical condition is key. Awareness campaigns can reduce discrimination and encourage more individuals to seek treatment without fear.
- **Increased Access and Resources:** Expanding access to affordable treatment, especially in underserved areas, is essential. This can be achieved through international collaboration, resource-sharing, and telehealth services to reach more people.

Questions for Considerations

1. Who are the primary stakeholders affected by addiction and its treatment, and how do their perspectives differ (e.g., individuals suffering from addiction, healthcare providers, governments)?
2. How can international organizations like the WHO and UNODC effectively collaborate with national governments to improve addiction treatment and reduce the stigma surrounding it?
3. What role can technology and telemedicine play in improving access to addiction rehabilitation and ensuring consistent care across geographic locations?
4. What are the most effective ways to increase accessibility to addiction treatment in low- and middle-income countries where resources and infrastructure are limited?
5. What role does the criminal justice system play in addressing or exacerbating addiction, and how can policies shift from punishment to rehabilitation?
6. What role does public education and awareness play in reducing misconceptions about addiction, and what strategies can be used to ensure widespread public engagement and understanding?

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