

The Opioid Epidemic and the Therapeutic Community Model

An Essential Guide

Jonathan D. Avery
Kristopher A. Kast
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San Patrignano: Lessons from the Italian Experience

Gabriele Manella, Giovanni Pieretti,
Alessandra Landi, and Bruno Genetti

An Overview of Addiction Treatment Services and the Official Data on Use in Italy

Drug use trends are complex and ever changing, and supplying data on these is extremely difficult, as is outlining addiction treatment services. We have opted to use data from the Annual Report to the Italian Parliament (carried out by the Department for Anti-Drug Policies) and EMCDDA annual reports (the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction) to introduce this topic.

Italy's drug addiction treatment system stands out in Europe. The public sector and private services work together and have been strengthened through an accreditation system within the National Health Service that identifies healthcare providers offering services for substance use disorders. This system as a whole has made significant progress in the treatment of heroin and cocaine addictions: drug-related deaths have decreased in recent

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years, and the same trend is to be found in acute viral hepatitis, HIV, and AIDS among drug users [2]. However, overdose deaths increased in 2018 (mirroring the American crisis), and heroin use is increasing, with most deaths involving this opioid. The behavioral addictions (gambling, Internet gaming disorder, etc.) also present a new challenge with their increasing recognition.

The Italian treatment system is divided into 638 public services for addictions (*SerD*) and 917 accredited private services (TCs). 21,458 new users were treated by SerD in 2016, and the total number of users was 143,271. Opioid-related cases were the most frequent with 62,868 people, while high-risk opioid user numbers in Italy are estimated to range from 180,000 to 230,000 [3]. Cannabinoids user numbers have also recently increased, as has related morbidity due to a marked increase in the psychoactive constituents (THC) of marijuana products. 11% of SerD users in 2016 were treated for cannabinoids and 12% of hospital admissions were related to this substance. Most SerD patients are male, and their average age ranges from 30 to 54 years. New users are younger than those already in treatment (the average age is 32 vs. 41 years).

Concerning TCs, the DPA data [2] shows that 15,563 people were treated in 2016, and 4764 of these began treatment over the last year.

The Italian Therapeutic Community Model

Italian TCs have developed over the last 40 years and represent a unique and significant therapeutic modality for substance use disorders in the country [7]. Among international organizations focused on addiction treatment and scientific research, the Italian TC model is considered unique. The heterogeneous services and practices across Italian TCs share certain cultural values. Rural Italian culture, incorporating the Christian social tradition and a focus on life's essentials—including a sense of home, work ethic, healthy living, and producing and consuming food in community—has formed the basis of a “culture of the essentials” (*cultura dell'essenzialità*) in Italian TCs that fosters a milieu supportive of sobriety and stable recovery.