

Ethical dilemmas of harm reduction for substance users

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Abstract

This lecture attempts to review some essential ethical dilemmas emerging with the theme of harm reduction for substance users. This is a particularly controversial field of addictological interventions, generating different questions and answers. The lecture focuses on human freedom and responsibility, and the ethical questions of the relationship between the individual and the society. We can find conflicting values, and different kinds of philosophical approaches here, for instance Aristotle's or Mill's ideas. Another important aspect of the topic is the fundamental models, criminalization and medicalization, and the ways they construe the meanings of drug use and harm reduction. The lecture also raises the question of whether persons suffering from substance (or behavioural) dependence are responsible for their dependence or not. We can see existentialist and structural approaches, or we can also talk about the relevant concept of the 12-step recovering communities at this point. Finally, some pro and contra arguments for and against harm reduction is discussed; there are possible arguments according to which harm reduction programmes should be terminated, while another possible reasoning suggests that it is a social responsibility to maintain these facilities.

Keywords: ethics; freedom; harm reduction programmes; social responsibility; substance use