

AGUSTINA REQUEJO

PRESERVING SANITY: CHALLENGING OVER-INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN THE ARGENTINIAN MENTAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Argentinian mental health institutions are harming patients' wellness instead of improving it because hospitalization criteria and the enforcement of patients' rights are absent. Mental health institutions are establishments that oversee the diagnosis, treatment, and long-term care of mental illness. When we talk about mental illness, we are referring to different syndromes, such as schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety, among others, where people's cognition, emotions, and conduct are affected. The global history of these institutions is an extremely sad one, but, fortunately, they have improved dramatically lately. However, that does not mean that the extant institutions have completely fulfilled their promise. Argentina's health care policies are not as developed as

they should be at this point, cases of mental illness are getting worse every year, and people don't seem to be improving. In this essay, I am going to focus on the Argentinian mental health system, its weaknesses, and methods to adjust it. Overall, I will discuss how the system could change in order to improve patients' mental health.

Mental disorders among the Argentine population are more common than is commonly acknowledged. According to an "epidemiological study of mental health in the general population of the Argentine Republic" carried out in 2018, the lifetime prevalence of any mental disorder in the general population of Argentina in those over 18 years old was 29.1%, and the projected risk of life to seventy-five



The El Bolson Area Hospital, Rio Negro, has a mental health team, a cultural center, an organic garden, a home, and a social enterprise. Photo credit: Redacción.

years old was 37.1%. About a quarter to more than half of people received treatment that is unlikely to be effective (Stagnaro et al.). How patients receive treatment is essential to their health and wellness. As with many other specialties in medicine, care in mental health is the key to how the patient is going to overcome their illness. With that in mind, we must recall the following World Health Organization's statistic: "In 2019, 1 in every 8 people, or 970 million people around the world were living with a mental disorder, with anxiety and depressive disorders the most common" ("Mental Disorders"). This means that mental disorders are more common than one might think and that they must be considered to be as important as physical illness. Also, if that high number of people suffer from these diseases, that means that the system must be prepared to attend to them.

Unfortunately, according to the Argentinian government's website, that is not the case: "From these [patients], two thirds do not receive any type of care. In turn, those who receive it are mostly admitted to hospitals or psychiatric clinics" ("Salud mental"). Therefore, what we have here is a huge dilemma because we know that isolating and enclosing people, including healthy people, brings negative impacts such as exclusion, taking away their capacity to live in community, and maybe retrogressing their illness ("Salud mental").

On the one hand, the size of the Argentinian mental health system has dramatically declined since 1863. In that year, the José T. Borda Psychiatric Hospital was inaugurated, then the best psychiatric hospital in all of Latin America. Today, it is on the brink of closure (De Benedetti). What is the reason for this dramatic change? And the larger question is, was there actually ever a good mental health system in Argentina? There are many topics to discuss at this point in the essay, but I would like to start with the most important one: the rights of psychiatric patients. According to Argentinian Law number 26,657, enacted in 2010, a person with a mental illness has the right to be treated in a general hospital; to receive the most convenient therapeutic alternative, one which does not limit their rights and freedoms and strives towards family, work, and community integration; to be accompanied by family before, during, and after treatment; to make decisions related to their care and treatment within their capabilities; and to never consider their mental illness as a state that cannot be modified,

among others. Furthermore, the law clearly indicates that a person cannot be hospitalized against their will and that such hospitalization must be as brief as possible ("Salud mental, Ley 26.657"). What is currently happening is that this law is not followed, and that is why we do not see improvements in patients.

Leonardo Ariel Gorbacz, author of this law, is a political human rights activist, and when he proposed it he stated that the mental health system is repressive. This repressiveness rests on three pillars: confinement, judicialization and medication (Gorbacz). His first point covers the over-hospitalization that exists across prestigious mental health hospitals in Argentina, such as the Borda and Moyano Hospital, where the average length of hospitalization is ten years, according to Gorbacz. In addition, patients cannot make any decisions about their hospitalization. In many cases, they cannot even have contact with their families, they cannot reintegrate into society, and doctors consider their illnesses incurable. For example, Verónica, an anonymous patient, confessed on the website *Argentina without Asylums (Argentina sin Manicomios)* that she suffered while she was there for a long hospitalization. She compares her confinement at the psychiatric hospital with a prison's, saying that the first is worse than the second, since, by losing autonomy and the ability to make decisions in daily life, one becomes incapable of feeling that, at some point, one is going to get out of there ("La Voz de Sus Sobrevivientes"). Another former patient who told her story on this website was María, who was hospitalized for twenty-two months and claims that, after leaving it, her life was not the same. Just like them, there are many cases in which patients know that their hospitalization was longer than necessary, the environment did not help them with their recovery, and, in many cases, there are even stories of mistreatment by medical staff ("La Voz de Sus Sobrevivientes"). The institutional mental health system in Argentina is not doing any good for the people who need it, and that is why it requires urgent reform.

The second point that Gorbacz mentions, judicialization, refers to how the justice system does nothing in favor of patients' rights. There are many people who are institutionalized during acute episodes. The system then takes away their ability to exercise certain freedoms, such as voting, when they really should not be considered temporarily incapacitated (Gorbacz). The legal system, which plays a very important

role in these matters, should be a pillar of protection for individuals in vulnerable situations, but in the field of mental health, it seems to act more as a tool of stigmatization. Judicial decisions are often based on bias, resulting in a denial of patients' autonomy and dignity. Instead of promoting inclusion and support, the justice system becomes another obstacle on the path to recovery and social integration. The judicial systems' lack of understanding of and sensitivity to the complexities of mental health contributes to a cycle of discrimination and exclusion, further exacerbating the situation of those who are already struggling with mental illness. Instead of

People believe that they suffer from mental disorders and become unnecessarily dependent on these medications. Agreeing with this theory, Emilio Pol Yanguas notes in the article "Antipsychotics for Schizophrenia," that there are certain psychopharmaceuticals, such as those for schizophrenia, that, though they serve to treat acute episodes and "cover up" certain serious symptoms, are not recommended for prolonged treatment due to their adverse effects and because they do not treat the cause of the illness. In this essay, the author suggests that diseases such as schizophrenia should be better monitored and the medication should be administered more appropriately since their



Art at the Camino Abierto Foundation. Photo credit: Redacción.

focusing on the causes of pathologies and offering realistic solutions, the law often settles for simplistic solutions, thus perpetuating a system that not only does not solve problems, but also contributes to their aggravation.

Lastly, over-medication, according to Gorbacz, also contributes to the repressive mental health system. According to this author, psychotropic drugs are a large business that is only interested in improving sales and making more money at the cost of misinformation among the population. He assures readers that psychotropic drugs are designed to cover up symptoms that we all experience without actually suffering from a particular illness.

cause is usually ideologically and commercially constructed. Moreover, when the patient consumes these drugs for a long time, they only create physical and emotional dependence, making recovery almost impossible (Pol Yanguas).

On the other hand, there have been new improvements that have made the patients feel a difference. Given that the government recognizes that "confinement and isolation in these institutions contribute to the loss of social skills, generate dependency, and are contrary to human rights," as it says on its website, it is logical that it has decided to take action in the matter ("Salud mental"). The province of Río

Negro is a clear example of this. There, they implemented a new model of social inclusion for people with mental health problems. The name of this place is the Camino Abierto Cultural Centre, and its objective is "*demanicomialization*," that is, the integration of psychiatric patients into society in order to reduce their symptoms, alleviate the disease, and help them interact in a healthy and suitable environment with their family and friends.

In this system, workshops and events are organized to integrate people with mental disorders with their neighbors for them to share activities that make them get out of their routine a little and interact with each other in a dignified environment. A successful example of this system is José, who was diagnosed with psychosis and was hospitalized for eleven years in the general hospital of Bariloche, Río Negro. The doctors determined that the case was already chronic and irrecoverable, contradicting what the law indicates. When he joined the workshops at the Camino Abierto Cultural Centre, José's situation changed radically. Now he dances, smiles, and enjoys life with his wife and his friends (Wei He). The neighbors, who at first opposed this system, declaring that it was going to be full of rapists and violent people, discovered that the reality of these people is very different from what they thought. If more people with mental health problems received the support that this community gives, the recovery rate would be much higher and we would avoid all the cases of abuse, confinement, and over-hospitalization that we currently experience in the community in Argentina (Wei He).

Numerous components of the current system need to be changed in order to enhance it and improve the mental health of patients in Argentina. Firstly, it is important to ensure that Law 26,657 is followed. This law protects the rights of those who suffer from mental diseases by ensuring that they receive treatment in normal hospitals, have access to competent care, and actively participate in their treatment decisions while preventing unauthorized hospitalizations. Deinstitutionalization must also be encouraged, as is the case at the Camino Abierto Cultural Centre in Río Negro, which establishes communities where individuals with mental illnesses engage in activities that promote social engagement and connection. Through public awareness programs, education and knowledge are crucial for lowering stigma and discrimination surrounding mental illness.

For treatment to be efficient and accessible, outpatient services must be strengthened to offer individual and group counseling, access to drugs, and ongoing monitoring. Modern methods must be taught to mental health practitioners, who must also respect patients' rights and give priority to recovery-focused therapies. Meeting the needs of persons with mental disorders requires including the community in service planning and monitoring. Making informed judgements requires reliable data collection and continuous service quality improvement. Those who have loved ones with mental illness should support their families by creating support groups and family therapy programs. Offering high-quality services and ensuring that everyone has access to them requires adequate funding. Last but not least, a continual assessment of the mental health system is necessary to pinpoint areas that require improvement and adjust to the population's changing requirements, ensuring that patients and their families experience considerable changes.

In conclusion, there are several obstacles that the Argentinian mental health system must overcome in order to effectively treat and support those who are suffering from mental diseases. While there have been some encouraging changes, such as the acceptance of the necessity for community-based care and deinstitutionalization, there are still major weaknesses that worsen rather than enhance patients' wellbeing. The failure to adequately implement and enforce existing legislation, such as Law 26,657, which protects the rights of mental patients, is one of the main problems. Prominent activists and experts in the field, like Leonardo Ariel Gorbacz, have drawn attention to major weaknesses in the current mental healthcare system, such as a high dependence on medicine, prolonged institutionalization, and judicialization. The autonomy, wellbeing, and chances of recovery of patients have all declined as a result of these problems. Also, there are testimonies from people who have first-hand experience with the system, and they highlight the negative consequences of long-term institutionalization, emphasizing the urgent need for complete change to create a more humane and efficient system of mental health care. Patients frequently experience unwelcome prolonged hospital stays, little autonomy, and a lack of family support, all of which limit their ability to recover and integrate back into society.



professionals, government entities, advocacy organizations, and the general public. Argentina can work to create a more equal, empathetic and efficient mental health care system that respects the autonomy and dignity of all of its residents by putting the rights and wellbeing of people with mental disorders first and allowing comprehensive, person-centered strategies into practice. A change of this kind will not only help the people who are immediately affected by this, but it will also help create a society that is more inclusive and compassionate in general. ❖

Medical staff mistreatment incidents aggravate the issue further.

Positively, programs like the Camino Abierto Cultural Centre in Río Negro show the potential for community-based care methods to be effective. These initiatives emphasize "demanicomialization," social inclusion, and giving patients the chance to participate in worthwhile activities. These methods have demonstrated that when people are given the chance to live happy, productive lives in the community, recovery and improved mental health are attainable.

Strictly enforcing patient rights, emphasizing community-based care, reducing stigma through awareness campaigns, bolstering outpatient services, training medical professionals in recovery-oriented care, involving the community in service planning, enhancing data collection and quality improvement, supporting families, securing adequate funding, and continuing system evaluation and adaptation are all necessary to improve the Argentinian mental health system. It is critical to address these problems and put these suggestions into practice if the Argentinian mental health system is to develop into one that genuinely enhances patients' mental health and wellbeing while upholding their rights and dignity.

Argentina's mental health care reform movement needs cooperation from a range of participants, including citizens, medical

WORKS CITED

- De Benedetti, Camila. "Noticias - Argentina: El Declive De Uno De Los Principales Hospitales Psiquiátricos De A. Latina." *BBC Mundo*, BBC, 17 Aug. 2018, www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2012/08/120817_argentina_hospital_borda_crisis_vh.
- Gorbacz, Leonardo Ariel. "El Desmontaje Del Sistema Represivo En Salud Mental." *Revista Salud Mental y Comunidad*, no. 1, 2011, pp. 112-7, <https://silo.tips/download/ley-el-desmontaje-del-sistema-represivo-en-salud-mental-leonardo-ariel-gorbacz>
- "La Voz De Sus Sobrevivientes." *Argentina Sin Manicomios*, 26 Nov. 2020, <https://argentinasinmanicomios.acij.org.ar/la-voz-de-sus-sobrevivientes/>.
- "Mental Disorders." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders#:~:text=In%202019%2C%201%20in%20every,of%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic.
- Pol Yanguas, Emilio. "Antipsychotics for Schizophrenia: Paradigm of Psychiatric Drugs." *Collective Health*, vol. 11, no.1, 2015, pp. 115-28, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25853834/>.
- "Salud Mental." *Argentina.Gob.Ar*, 2 Mar. 2023, www.argentina.gob.ar/salud/mental-y-adicciones/que-es.
- "Salud Mental, Ley 26.657." *Argentina.Gob.Ar*, 31 July 2023, www.argentina.gob.ar/justicia/derechofacil/leysimple/salud-mental#titulo-1.
- Stagnaro, Juan Carlos, et al. "Estudio Epidemiológico De Salud Mental En Población General De La República Argentina." *Vertex*, vol. 29, no. 142, 2018, pp. 275-99. <https://apsa.org.ar/docs/vertex142.pdf>.
- Wei He, Lucía. "Chau Manicomios: Cómo Río Negro Se Convirtió En Un Modelo Mundial Con Su Programa de Salud Mental." *Redacción*, 9 May 2018, www.redaccion.com.ar/manicomios-rio-negro-salud-mental/.

The citation system used in this essay is MLA 9th.