

SUMMARY

This study inquires into the health status of 730 toddy tappers in two areas (Kokuvil and Mallakam) in the Jaffna District, in the context of their socio-economic background and suggests methods for improvement in the standard of their health.

The survey research design was used for the collection of data on their socio-economic, occupational and health characteristics. A structured questionnaire was administered by sixteen final year medical students. A sample of 25 percent of those currently engaged in tapping and controls was clinically examined by the investigator and another medical officer and comparisons made.

The tappers, all males are self-employed and belong to particular castes, low in the hierarchy of the caste system among Sri Lankan Tamils. Tapping is a traditional occupation of 82.5 percent of this class of workers who learn the art from their family members. The work entails climbing 14-16 trees, twice a day to a height of 40-60 feet per tree. Most of them commence tapping before their twentieth year. Thirty six percent of them work as full-time and thirty percent as part-time tappers. The rest changed occupation, retired or are accounted dead. The socio-economic conditions of the tappers need improvement. The average size of a tapper's family is 6.5 persons, and his average monthly family income is about two thousand rupees. This is inadequate to maintain himself and a family, resulting usually in indebtedness. Their income could possibly be increased as 50 percent of the active tappers work below optimum capacity because of non-availability of suitable trees for tapping.

Although 68 percent of them own their land and house, 45 percent live in temporary structures. Water supply is available to most of them; however, only 43 percent had latrines.

The educational level of the tappers is low; 75 percent did not study beyond Grade V, and this is reflected in many of their practices like reading etc. Only 38 percent of those eligible to practice family planning did so. The most popular methods adopted by them were female sterilisation (72.5%) and the practice of safe periods (16.8%). Alcoholism is a major social problem with 47 percent of tappers drinking daily. Of these, 57 percent consumed liquor at work.

Accidental fall is the most prominent occupationally related problem among tappers, others being incised wounds, stings by bees and wasps, and dog and snake bites. Illnesses such as rheumatism, callosities and haemorrhoids which are occupation related, are common. The high prevalence of hookworm could be due to a combination of poor home and work environment.

The leading causes of death among tappers are - accidental falls (29%), suicides (11%) malignant neoplasm (11%) and cardio-vascular diseases (10%).

The western form of medical treatment especially by general practitioners is preferred for common diseases, while ayurvedic treatment is preferred for fractures and snake bites. Ten percent of active tappers had been admitted to hospitals during the previous year, mostly to Government institutions. A half of these admissions was for occupationally related disorders.

In the absence of an organised occupational health service for these workers, it is suggested that the proposed Primary Health Care Centres incorporate this service, including counselling on accident prevention, family planning, alcoholism etc. Research studies in the fields of ergonomy and agronomy are also suggested.

The present role of the Northern Province Palm Products Co-operative Societies Union should be widened in the field of welfare activities.