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ABSTRACT

The present study conducted during 2004/2005 was designed to achieve the following:

the epidemiology of addictive substance use in the Colombo District, Sri Lanka, and four specific objectives focused on:

estimating the prevalence of addictive substance use among persons 15-49 years,

describing the socio-demographic and behavioural correlates among current substance users,

estimating the prevalence of injecting drug use (IDU), and

determining the prevalence of selected bio-markers of risk behaviour among substance users.

The study consisted of two components. A community based survey of 2500 persons between 15-49 years, selected using a multistage stratified cluster sampling procedure. In the second component respondent-driven sampling (RDS) was used to identify 250 current drug users and to estimate their characteristics especially injecting drug use.

The present study estimated the prevalence of current smoking among the study sample to be 29.6% (CI 27.0 - 32.1) for males, and 0.6% (CI 0.3 - 1.1) for females, with a total prevalence rate of 15%. Smoking among females was very low with 0.9% ever smokers, and 0.6% current smokers.

Age at first use for males (80%) was between 15-24 years, and within this cohort 45% commenced smoking between 15-19 years. Seven percent were early starters, commencing below 15years. Mean age at first use was 19.5 (±4.3) years. Overall prevalence of dependency among the 15-49 age group stood at 9.2% with 18.5% for males.

Risk factors associated with smoking are : male, age 30 or more, living in urban area, education level below GCE (A/L), engaged in elementary occupation, with an income less than Rs. 10 000.00 per month. Approximate daily expenditure of current male smokers for the district of Colombo estimated at Rs. 1.63 million.

The addictive substance currently abused most in the Colombo District is alcohol with a prevalence rate of 39.7% (CI 36.9-42.4) for males and 4.3% (CI 3.3-5.5) for females. Alcohol dependency for both sexes is relatively high, with 27% for males and 24% for females, among the current drinkers with a total prevalence of dependence of 5.9%, and 10.8% for males and 1% for females.

Overall 65% of ever drinkers had their first drink after the 20th year. For males 75% commenced between age 15-24, compared to females (58%) who were late starters. Mean commencing age for alcohol users was 21.6 ±5.3 years. Risk factors associated with alcohol use: being urban male, Sinhalese by ethnicity, and ever married, drinking status of peers, parents, siblings and current smoking.

Current prevalence of use of substances other than tobacco and alcohol was found to be 3.0% (CI 2.0-3.9) for males, and 0.02% (CI 0.07-0.74) for females. Of the respondents majority (3.2%) had used cannabis, followed by heroin with 0.8%. Users were predominantly males. Prevalence of ever use are overall 4.0% with 7.0% for males and 0.3% for females. There was a tendency for use of multiple substances by the respondents. Mean age at ever use was 22.3 ± 5.3 years.

The study demonstrates that most start with smoking, go on to alcohol use and then on to abuse of other illicit substances.

Risk factors for other substance use were age over 35 years, male and married, urban dweller, predominantly Sinhalese and Buddhist, education level below G.C.E A/L, elementary employment with monthly income below Rs. 10,000.00.

RDS estimates of ever injecting drug use among current substance users was 12.6% (CI 5.1-24.5), and none were current injectors. Injectors were predominantly male. Risk factors for injecting drug use were male, urban, age below that of non-injectors, never married, relatively higher level of education, being in high income brackets.

Most biological markers of risk behaviour were not different to the population prevalence. Prevalence of HBV was 7.6%, none were currently infective (HBsAg negative), prevalence of anti-HCV was 0.4% and prevalence of syphilis was 1.6%. None tested positive for HIV. However, risk behaviour was high providing the potential for rapid spread of any infection entering the network.

The study identifies alcohol abuse as a problem needing urgent attention and the community of drug users as a group who should be included in routine behavioural surveillance.