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ABSTRACT

This cross sectional descriptive study was carried out with the objective of describing the knowledge and exposure to sources of information on sexually transmitted infections and to describe the condom usage pattern among Sri Lanka Air Force personnel.

Six hundred study participants were selected from Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) camps by random cluster sampling technique where the clusters were selected using the probability proportional to the size technique. Of the 600 participants, 87.8% were males and 12.2% were females. The age range of the participants were 18-48 years and the mean age was 28.7 years (SD = 5.7). Majority (63%) of the study sample had an education level more than G.C.E (O/L). Two thirds of the study sample were married. Fifty nine percent of respondents had more than 6 years of service in the SLAF. Only 13% had never worked in an operational area.

Basic facts (such as aetiology, diagnostic methods, misconceptions), methods of transmission, signs and symptoms and prevention of STI/HIV were studied. The knowledge of HIV of the Sri Lanka Air Force personal was good. It was better than the knowledge on other STI. Awareness on basic facts increased with age, education level and work experience. Some notable observations were that more than 88% respondents had the correct knowledge that healthy looking people may also be infected with HIV. Sixty eight percent were able to name three STI's correctly and 92% knew that AIDS is caused by a virus

Knowledge on transmission and non transmission methods was also good. Eighty percent had the correct knowledge on the three main modes of transmission HIV infection in Sri Lanka. Fifty two percent were able to dispel five misconceptions of HIV transmission. A statistically significant association with education level and work experience with the knowledge scores on transmission was observed.

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Knowledge on symptoms and signs of STI's and prevention of STI's was satisfactory, with more than 65% of respondents knowing the correct answers for questions on these topics. However, a statistically significant association between knowledge on signs and symptoms and sociodemographic variables was not observed.

Most (64%) SLAF personnel have the correct knowledge that abstinence, being faithful to one partner and condom use are methods of prevention. Similarly they are aware of the fact that condoms need to be used with any risky sexual exposure.

Similar to the general population, among the SLAF personnel also the popular channel of communication was the television (96%), radio (92%) and newspapers (96%). The preferred time slots they usually watch television was between 7-9 p.m. and listen to radio was 6-8a.m. When inquired about the sources from which they gained knowledge specifically on STI/HIV/AIDS during the month preceding the study, 43% of SLAF personnel gained knowledge from television, 37% from newspapers and 33% from the radio. Almost 80% have gained knowledge on STI/HIV/AIDS by reading books. In addition more than 86% of respondents had had some education on STI/AIDS during the last year, mostly by SLAF doctors and nurses. All these methods may have contributed to their good knowledge.

Ninety six percent had the correct knowledge that the condom could be used as a method of contraception and 95% had the correct knowledge that it could be used to prevent STI's. Almost 78% had the correct knowledge that condoms have to be used with any risky exposure not only with commercial sex workers. There were 87.5% ever and 8.2% current condom users. Twelve percent had never used condoms. Of the ever users 20% used it to prevent STI's and 40% as a dual method of protection. This may be indirect evidence of risky sexual behaviour taking place among Air Force personnel. Nearly 33% of ever users had faced problems during use of condoms and the main problem was bursting of condoms (39%). Some have the incorrect knowledge that condoms reduce sexual pleasure, but in this study only 20% had this incorrect knowledge. The purpose of condom use among all current users was to prevent contraception.

More than 94% of respondents were educated on the correct use of condoms mainly by SLAF doctors and Nurses (68%). Only 64% were given demonstrations using penile models. Nearly 96% of SLAF personal were of the view that condoms are easy to obtain. Most (73%) were of the view that it may take less than 30 minutes to obtain a condom. Ninety eight percent indicated that the Sri Lanka Air Force hospitals were the known main locations which condoms are available.

This study reveals that SLAF personnel have a good knowledge on STI/HIV/AIDS. Most of the time respondents had correctly answered the questions on HIV / AIDS exceeding 70%. The knowledge about the use of condoms, its availability and accessibility is also satisfactory. This study observes that television, radio, newspapers and books have been sources of information in addition to the programmes held by the Sri Lanka Air Force.