

## **ABSTRACT**

This study was carried out to describe the level of food hygiene and the knowledge, attitudes and practices of food handlers in school canteens in Colombo Municipal Council area. It is a descriptive cross sectional study. The study comprised of two components.

In component one, the level of food hygiene was described. For the first component, 123 school canteens were studied using an observational check list. The level of food hygiene was satisfactory in 41.1 % of canteens in government schools and in 83.3% of semi government and private schools. The environmental sanitation was satisfactory in 12.6% of canteens in government schools and in 91.7% of semi government and private schools. Only 69.1% of government school canteens had water supply. In more than 83% of canteens in both categories, the food was displayed satisfactorily.

In component two of the study, the knowledge, attitudes and practices of food handlers were assessed using an interviewer administered questionnaire and by direct observation using a checklist. The study demonstrated that over half (55.8%) of the food handlers had good knowledge regarding food hygiene and food borne diseases. The knowledge on food borne diseases was rather inadequate. Significantly (statistically) higher knowledge was observed with age more than 45 years, female sex and ability of food handlers to read and write in more than two languages. But knowledge didn't show any statistically significant difference between educational level and experience of food handler. Only 23.1 % of food handlers knew about the School Canteen Policy.

Almost all the food handlers had favourable attitudes towards food hygiene, personal hygiene and selling a safe food. But one-fifth of food handlers had unfavourable attitudes towards learning about food hygiene.

The practices were poor among 63.3% of food handlers. Only 32.7% have been educated on food safety. Large majority of food handlers were serving food bare handedly. Only 8% of food handlers used to wash hands with detergents before handling the food.

Practices didn't significantly (statistically) relate with age, sex, educational level or experience of the work.

All the canteens were supervised by both the Public Health Inspectors (PHII) and the school authorities. The frequency of supervisions by PHII is not adequate. No canteens had H- 800 forms.

The food handlers have to be registered, educated and certificated. The Ministry of Education has to take actions to give tenders of canteens depending on the performance of previous year. H-800 forms should be maintained to all school canteens and legal action also should be taken whenever necessary. School authorities should take steps to educate not only the canteen management but the food handlers too regarding the School Canteen Policy.

Key words: Food safety, Food handler, Food hygiene