

ABSTRACT

Background: Sri Lanka was known to be a country which was less prone to natural disasters, and mainly dealt with man-made disasters, due to the 30-year civil war, which originated in the 1980's. But recent statistics show that, since 1998, natural disasters have increased dramatically, whilst the man-made disasters have gradually subsided, with the resolution of the civil war. This upward trend in natural disasters are a direct result of human urbanization activities, unregulated development, etc. in the country, as well as in the region, resulting in freak weather patterns and so on. Most disasters will result in a large number of victims, who will have to be temporarily housed in emergency camps, until measures to relocate may be undertaken. During that time, the main health services providers will be the Public Health Inspectors, working under the Medical Officer of Health, at the grassroot level. Their knowledge and attitudes, in provision of safe food and water to the camp occupants, will be of great importance, in minimizing morbidity or mortality, and providing healthcare to the victims, at an optimal level.

Objective: To assess the knowledge and attitudes of public health inspectors of Central province, regarding provision of safe food and water, in emergency camp situations.

Methodology: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out, involving all public health inspectors on active duty, in the central province. A self-administered questionnaire was used to assess the knowledge and attitudes in provision of safe food and water, in emergency camps.

Results: There were 135 participants (response rate 96.4%), from all three RDHS divisions in the Central province; RDHS Kandy 56 (41.5%), RDHS Matale 37 (27.4%), and RDHS NuwaraEliya 42 (31.1%). All participants were males (n=135, 100%), and out of which, the majority (79, 58.9%), were above 40 years of age. 128 (94.1%) of all responders have a minimum education up to diploma level, whereas the remaining 7 (5.9%) have passed General Certificate of Education. (Advanced Levels).

During their active service period, 87 (64.4%) had worked in emergency camps, following disasters. The basic knowledge on disasters, and provision of safe food and water in emergency camps were satisfactory 115 (85.9%). Majority were aware of the food safety measures, minimum water requirements, and water sanitations measures in an emergency camp. However, most of the PHIs' 118 (87.4%) had not heard of the international SPHERE standards of emergency camp management, whereas 61(45.2%) had not heard of the WASH principle in provision of safe water. Although the knowledge score was slightly better in those who were aware of the SPHERE standards and WASH principles, there was no significant association between them.

With regards to the attitudes, majority 115 (85.2%) said that a special coordinator was required to coordinate safe food and water provision activities in emergency camps. Overall attitudes regarding their role in an emergency camp, and its impact in minimizing morbidity and mortality of the occupants, and promoting their health, was excellent 71 (52.6%) .

Conclusion: All participants were males, out of which the majority were between 40 to 50 years of age, with completion of their secondary education. Majority of public health inspectors had a satisfactory basic knowledge on disasters and provision of safe food and water in emergency camps, with regards to food sanitation, water sanitation, minimum requirements, etc. Majority of PHIs' who participated, also had excellent attitudes towards their role, in ensuring better healthcare for the camp inmates. The main issue identified was the lack of awareness regarding international standards in disaster management. They should be given more opportunities for training and knowledge exchange programs with international exposure, which would further expend their knowledge, and help them in providing an improved healthcare service for their country.

