

Smoking, addiction and promotion – an inquiry into perceptions of a group of adolescents in the Kandy Education Zone

*A. M. A. L. R. Alagiyawanna¹, P. A. J. N. Wickramaratne², D. D. Samarasekera³

The Ceylon Journal of Medical Science 2005; 48: 25-31

Abstract

Introduction: Tobacco companies take vigorous action to promote smoking and to sustain the habit among young people. The companies mainly target students as they are in their formative stages of learning. Strong messages can influence their opinions leading to change in behavior.

Objectives: To describe the attitudes regarding smoking among the students, their awareness regarding promotional strategies of tobacco companies and to identify the methods of acquiring knowledge regarding these strategies among Grade 12 students in the Kandy Educational Zone.

Method: A descriptive cross sectional study was carried out. A multi stage cluster sampling method was adopted to select the study sample of 204. A pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire was used as the study instrument.

Results: More than 80% of both sexes perceived smoking as a negative social characteristic. Majority of the students (91.6%) thought that smokers have got addicted to it due to the lack of proper

understanding. Awareness among the students about the indirect promotional strategies of the tobacco companies was satisfactory as 47% of students knew about them. However, 41% had poor or very poor knowledge regarding these strategies. Mass media was shown to be a major source of acquiring knowledge on tobacco promotional strategies. Only one third of the students who participated in the study have been exposed to seminars/workshops conducted by anti narcotic organizations.

Conclusion: Students of our study population perceived smoking as a negative social characteristic. However, their knowledge regarding promotional strategies of tobacco companies needs improvement. Main mode of acquiring knowledge regarding promotional strategies was identified as mass media. The few who were exposed to seminars conducted by anti narcotic organizations were shown to have a significantly higher level of understanding on these strategies than the others.

Key words: Smoking, promotional strategies, tobacco companies, school students.

1. Medical Student (4th year), Faculty of Medicine, Colombo.

2. Medical Student (4th year), Faculty of Medicine, Colombo.

3. Lecturer in Medical Education, Faculty of Medicine, Colombo.

* Address for correspondence 158 B, Ihalagama, Gampaha (W.P.), Sri Lanka.

Introduction

"In every 10 seconds one dies due to the effects of smoking somewhere in the world" (1).

Smoking poses an immense threat to the well being of the people, economy of the country, environment and ultimately the development of the country. The money spent on tobacco by poor families in developing countries is enormous. Vast number of diseases including heart diseases, stroke, cancers and respiratory diseases are linked to tobacco use. It harms the non-smokers equally. The indirect impact on poor is much severe than the direct results caused by use of tobacco (2).

In many developed nations tobacco use is falling, due to effective public health campaigning and due to successful tobacco control programmes. These include increase in price through taxation, increase in restrictions in advertising and sponsorship and enforcement of restrictions on smoking in public and work places (3). To balance the loss of profits from the developed nations, the multinational tobacco companies concentrate more on developing countries by aggressively promoting their products. As a consequence, prevalence of smoking in countries like ours is increasing (4).

Tobacco companies take vigorous action to promote smoking and to sustain the habit among young people by using compelling advertisements, in the print and electronic media (5). Furthermore, they use very effective methods to promote tobacco, by showing it as glamorous and enjoyable, sponsoring sports events, organizing competitions, promoting their company logo which creates a positive image on smoking (6). The importance of this is that the companies target students as they are in their

formative stages of learning. Strong messages can influence their opinions leading to change in behavior. As the companies use their promotional campaigns in a subtle manner, the uninformed students perceive the tobacco company projected image as the socially correct behavior to follow.

A research study conducted by Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) in July 1998 showed an overall prevalence of smoking in selected districts of Sri Lanka as 41% and nearly 72% of this was among the age group 16-40yrs (7).

Objectives

To describe the attitudes on smoking and knowledge regarding tobacco promotional strategies among year 12 students of the Kandy Educational Zone.

The specific objectives were to describe the attitudes regarding smoking among the students and their awareness regarding promotional strategies of tobacco companies and to identify the methods of acquiring knowledge regarding these strategies.

Methods

A descriptive cross sectional study was carried out among students in Grade 12 in the Kandy Educational Zone. A multi stage cluster sampling method was adopted to select the study sample of 204. All the students who were present on the day of the study and who were willing to participate were included in the study. A pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire was used as the study instrument. Most of the questions were close ended for the convenience of the respondents.

Questionnaire consisted of three parts.

Part I: To find out students attitudes towards smoking.

Part II: To assess students knowledge regarding some promotional strategies using 20 questions. These were mostly based on the booklet – Media Sharp, published by ADIC- Media Unit (8).

Part III: Mode of acquiring knowledge, which helped in responding to Part I & II. A scoring system was used to assess the knowledge regarding promotional strategies. For each correct response 1 mark was given. Maximum mark any participant could obtain was 20. Student's t-test was applied to find out the statistical significance between groups.

Results

The study sample included 134 male

students (66%) and 70 female students (34%).

Part 1. Attitudes of the students regarding smoking

On analysis of the attitudes on smoking, more than 80% of both sexes (88% of girls and 91% of boys) perceived smoking as a negative social characteristic. The difference between sexes is not statistically significant. However, when analyzing the distribution of the responses given by the students on different aspects of smoking, 96.3% of boys and 67% of the girls said that it is a silly thing (Table 1). This difference is statistically significant. Twenty six percent of the girls said that smoking is an method to stand out in a crowd while only 11.2% of boys said so and this difference is statistically significant ($P < 0.05$).

Table 1. Distribution of responses given by the students for the statements regarding attitudes

Statements	Boys		Girls	
	Agreed (%)	Disagreed (%)	Agreed (%)	Disagreed (%)
1. A way of enjoyment ^a	20.1	79.9	2.8	97.2
2. It is a silly thing ^b	96.3	3.7	67.1	32.9
3. A way of relieving mental stress ^a	22.4	77.6	8.6	91.4
4. A way of spending money unnecessarily ^b	92.5	7.5	95.7	4.3
5. An alternative method to stand out in a crowd ^a	11.2	8.8	25.7	74.3
6. A way of acquiring diseases ^b	89.5	10.5	95.7	4.6
7. A way of entering the adult society ^a	17.9	82.1	8.6	91.4
8. Unfair for the family and the society ^b	84.3	15.7	91.4	8.6

^a statements 1, 3, 5 and 7 were assigned as positive perceptive attitudes towards smoking.

^b statements 2, 4, 6 and 8 were assigned as negative perceptive attitudes towards smoking.

On analysis of the students attitudes regarding why people get addicted to smoking, majority said that it is due to lack of proper understanding. Only 27% said that it is the effect of seeing tobacco use in films (Table 2)

Part 2. Assessment of the knowledge of students regarding promotional strategies of tobacco companies

Knowledge was assessed using 20 questions and these were categorized into 3 parts, (A, B & C) according to the responses.

When the final analysis was done, it was found that 49% of boys and 43% of girls knowledge is in the satisfactory category. However, 37% of boys and 49% of girls knowledge is in the poor/very poor category. (Table 3)

The knowledge regarding indirect promotional strategies of the tobacco companies among girls and boys did not show a statistically significant difference.

Part 3. Ways of acquiring knowledge, which helped in answering the questionnaire

Most of the students (80%) acquired the knowledge regarding indirect promotional strategies of the tobacco companies by the mass media.

Nearly 38% acquired this by participating in seminars/workshops conducted by anti-narcotic organizations (Table 4). The difference between the knowledge of those who have participated in seminars / workshops conducted by anti-narcotic organizations and those who have not is statistically significant.

Table 2. Distribution of attitudes of the students regarding why people get addicted to smoking

Statements	Percentage
1. Due to lack of proper understanding	91.6
2. Because actors/actresses smoke	26.9
3. Said to be enjoyable	69.1
4. Peer pressure	82.8
5. Advertisements	58.3
6. Because others smoke	52.9
7. To forget problems	52.9
8. Other ^a	16.6

^a Other category includes; To stand out in a crowd – 5.9%; Try it as an experiment and then get addicted to it – 4.4%; Thinking that they might get isolated otherwise – 2.4%; To attract the opposite sex – 1.4%; To get mental satisfaction – 0.9%; To have friends – 0.5%; Carelessness of the parents during childhood - 0.5%; Family background - 0.5%.

[Students could select several answers]

Table 3. Distribution of scores given to assess knowledge of students by sex

Knowledge category	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Very good	0.8%	0%
Good	12.6%	8.6%
Satisfactory	49.3%	42.8%
Poor	26.8%	35.7%
Very poor	10.5%	12.9%
	100%	100%

Scale: Very good 18-20; Good 15-17; Satisfactory 12-14; Poor 9-11; Very poor ≤ 8

Table 4. Distribution of ways of acquiring knowledge, which helped in answering the questionnaire

Ways of acquiring knowledge	Percentage
Mass media	79.4%
Books	59.8%
Friends	59.3%
As part of the school curriculum	46.5%
Participating in seminars/workshops conducted by anti-narcotic organizations	38.2%
Other ^a	24.0%

^aOther methods were: By being in the society – 9.4%, Parents and teachers – 7.4%, Personal experiences – 3.4%, Close friends – 3.4%, Internet – 0.5 %

Discussion

The problem of smoking among young adults is growing day by day and we need to take very drastic antipromotional action to control this menace (4). Such action should specially target the children as tobacco companies are mainly targeting the children. Preventing young people from starting the habit would cut the number of deaths related to tobacco.

A study done on prevalence of smoking in a rural community in Sri Lanka showed a significantly higher prevalence of smoking among the uneducated than the educated. According to this study, 20.6% were smokers in the total population (9).

A satisfactory finding in our study was that more than 80% of students of both sexes perceived smoking as a negative social characteristic. However, only 67.1% of the

girls thought that smoking is a silly thing while 96.3% of boys thought so and this difference is statistically significant. Also, the percentage of girls who think that smoking is an alternative method to stand out in a crowd is significantly higher than in the boys; this may be due to the image that has been promoted by the tobacco companies.

Another study on "Effect of seeing tobacco use in films on trying smoking among adolescents" showed a strong, direct and independent association between seeing tobacco use in films and trying cigarettes (10).

Majority of the students of our study sample (91.6%) thought that the smokers have got addicted to it due to the lack of proper understanding and only 26.9% said it is because actors/actresses smoke. In our study 85.8% were not aware that advertising specially targets girls. Majority of the students were also not aware about the following:

The tobacco companies spend millions of money to prepare false research reports, they use their supportive groups to criticize and challenge the existing scientific data, they pay millions to certain scientists and get them to prepare false reports challenging the scientifically proven direct relationship between smoking and lung cancer and they use ladies in short dresses in public places called 'golden girls' to promote cigarettes (8). Our survey also showed that students awareness about indirect promotional strategies of the tobacco companies was satisfactory as 47% of them could correctly answer more than 50% of the questions on indirect promotional strategies used by tobacco companies. At the same time 41% had poor or very poor knowledge regarding these indirect promotional strategies.

On further analysis, mass media was shown to be a major source of acquiring knowledge on tobacco promotional strategies and only one third of the students have been exposed to seminars/workshops conducted by anti-narcotic organizations as a way of acquiring knowledge. Importantly, those who had participated were shown to have a significantly higher level of understanding on the strategies of tobacco companies to promote their products than those who had not participated in such activities.

The limitation of our study was the small sample size since we restricted our study to one educational zone.

Conclusion

Ninety percent of the students of our study population perceived smoking as a negative social characteristic. However, their knowledge regarding promotional strategies of tobacco companies was inadequate. Main mode of acquiring knowledge regarding these promotional strategies was identified as the mass media. Although, the seminars/workshops conducted by organizations dedicated to prevention of substance abuse are a less popular method of acquiring knowledge among students, the knowledge of those who participated was significantly high. We recommend extending such programmes island wide with more interactive sessions.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to Dr. Charukshi Arambepola and Professor Diyanath Samarasinghe for their continuous guidance and support throughout this project.

References

1. World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/feature/2003/08/en> (accessed on April 8, 2005).
2. Ghaffar A., Reddy K.S., Singhi M. Burden of non-communicable diseases in South Asia. *British Medical Journal* 2004; 328: 807-810.
3. Samarasinghe D. Regarding tobacco use in Sri Lanka. *Ceylon Medical Journal* 1992; 73: 69-70.
4. Samarasinghe D., Goonaratne C. Tobacco related harm in South Asia. *British Medical Journal* 2004; 328: 780.
5. Peiris M. The impact of tobacco and alcohol advertisements in mass media on children. *Alcohol and Drug Information Centre* 2002; 1-3.
6. Chapman S. Recent Advances: Tobacco control. *British Medical Journal* 1996; 313: 97-100.
7. Research study on drug consumption, Alcohol and Drug Information Centre; Research and Publication Unit. July 1998.
8. Media Sharp, booklet published by Alcohol and Drug Information Centre Media team, November 2002.
9. Mendis S. Tobacco use in a rural community in Sri Lanka. *Ceylon Medical Journal* 1998; 33: 23-26.
10. Sargent J.D., Beach M.L., Dalton M.A., Mott L.A., Tickle, J.J., Ahrens M.B., Heatherton T.F. Effect of seeing tobacco use in films on trying smoking among adolescents: A cross sectional study. *British Medical Journal*. 2001; 323: 1394-1397.