

To the Editors:

## A study on suicide by self immolation

*Ceylon Medical Journal* 2011; **56**: 182-183

Deaths from suicides reached a peak in Sri Lanka in 1995 to 48.7 per 100,000 population, the highest in the world. Several interventions reduced the rate to 20.6 per 100,000 in 2007 [1]. Self immolation (SI) as a method of suicide is reported from many developing countries [2,3]. In 2006, 3558 males and 946 females (total 4504) committed suicide in Sri Lanka. SI was the method used by 148 (3.3%) – 48 males and 130 females.

We studied suicidal deaths from burns at the Coroner's Court, Colombo, for one year from 1st January 2006. The investigating police officer and close relations/friends who attended the inquest held by an Inquirer into Sudden Deaths (ISD) were interviewed. There were 151 suicides – 93 men (62%) and 58 women (38%). 51 (34%) suicides were due to SI. Age and sex of the victims are shown in Table 1. The female to male ratio was 3.3:1.

**Table 1. Age and sex of the victims**

Age group	Male	Female	Total
0-19	1	10	11
20-29	3	13	16
30-39	2	4	6
40-49	5	5	10
50-59	0	3	3
60-69	1	1	2
70-79	0	1	1
80-89	0	1	1
>90	0	1	1
Total	12	39	51

**Table 2. Level of education**

Level of education	Number	Percentage
None	7	13.7%
Year 1-5	8	15.7%
Year 6-11	23	45.1%
Year 12-13	6	11.8%
Degree or Higher	1	2.0%
Not Known	6	11.8%
Total	51	100%

The level of education showed that 14% had no school education. 16% had school education up to year 5, 45% up to grade 6 - 11 and 12% up to year 13. 32 (63%) victims were married, 10 (20%) were single, 5 (10%) were widowed, 3 (6%) were living together and one (2%) was separated.

**Table 3. Reasons for suicide**

Reason for suicide	Number	Percentage
Psychosis	2	4.0%
Alcohol dependence	1	2.0%
Dispute with wife	5	10.0%
Dispute with husband	15	29.4%
Dispute with children	1	2.0%
Dispute with parents	5	10.0%
Dispute with brother/sister	1	2.0%
Unemployment	2	4.0%
Financial reasons	3	5.9%
Grief reaction	1	2.0%
Marital unhappiness	3	5.9%
Organic disease	2	4.0%
No clear reason	8	15.7%
'Broken' love affair	2	4.0%
Total	51	100%

The living circumstances of the victims showed that 42 (82%) were living with their families (including a partner) while 8% were living alone. five lived with friends or others. In 36 (71%) cases SI took place inside their own residence. One committed suicide in a boarding house and 14 in other private places. Although 33% of the victims were unemployed, it was the reason to commit suicide only in 2%. There were 6 skilled and 5 unskilled workers, 4 sales workers and one each of supervisors, technical workers and clerical workers. The commonest reason for suicide (45%) was dispute with the spouse/marital disharmony (Table 3). In this study nearly 53% of the victims were below 30 years and 76% were females highlighting the fact that SI is common among young females.

## Acknowledgements

The authors thank Wellcome Trust/National Health and Medical Research Council International Collaborative Research Grant 071669MA for financial assistance.

## References

1. Gunnell D, Fernando R, Hewagama M, Priyangika WD, Konradsen F, Eddleston M. The impact of pesticide regulations on suicide in Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Epidemiology* 2007; **36**: 1235-42.
2. Laloe V, Ganesan M. Self-immolation a common suicidal behaviour in eastern Sri Lanka. *Burns* 2002; **28**: 475-80.
3. Ahmadi A. Suicide by self-immolation: comprehensive overview, experiences and suggestions. *Journal of Burn Care Research* 2007; **28**: 30-41.
4. Sri Lanka Police. [http://www.police.lk/divisions/crime/mode\\_of\\_suicide\\_2006.htm](http://www.police.lk/divisions/crime/mode_of_suicide_2006.htm): 2006.

**R Fernando<sup>1</sup>, M Hewagama<sup>1</sup>, W D Priyangika<sup>1</sup>, S Range<sup>1</sup>, S Karunaratne<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.*

*Correspondence: RF, e-mail: <ravindrafernando@hotmail.co.uk>. Received 26 October 2010 and revised version accepted 6 April 2011. Competing interests: none declared.*

---