

OP-29: Disabilities and chronic illnesses - challenges faced and expectations from university support systems: a study among medical undergraduates of the University of Colombo

C. L. Weeraratne¹, A. D. A. Fernando², N. Senanayake³, M. Dayabandara⁴, R. E. E Silva⁵, V. Hewageegana⁵, D. G. S.K. L. Jayawardana⁶, M. R. Haniffa⁵, H. M. P. M. K. Haluwana⁷, P. P. Kumaradasa¹, M. Gunawardane¹, K. D. I. Wasudeva⁸

¹Department of Pharmacology, ²Department of Physiology, ³Department of Medical Microbiology and Immunology, ⁴Department of Psychiatry, ⁵Department of Family Medicine, ⁶Department of Allied Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

⁷Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

⁸Health Center, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Introduction: Despite a recent increase in the number of undergraduates with disabilities and chronic illnesses enrolling in tertiary education, their concerns and difficulties remain under-explored. The objective of this study was to assess the prevalence of disabilities and chronic illnesses among undergraduates of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo and to identify the academic and socioeconomic challenges they face and the support they expect from the university to overcome these.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted using total population sampling of 1589 undergraduates of the faculty. Data were collected through a self-administered, online questionnaire with open- and close-ended questions.

Results: A total of 408 undergraduates participated in the study. The mean age was 22.2 ± 1.80 years. Thirty-nine (9.6%), 36 (8.8%) and 39 (9.6%) had disabilities, chronic illnesses, or both, respectively. Forty-three suffered from disabilities/chronic illnesses for more than five years. Visual impairment (34.2%) and asthma (17.5%) were the most common disability and chronic illness, respectively. The majority (n=69; 61%) were reluctant to disclose their condition to the faculty due to reasons such as fear of stigma and rejection. The most frequent academic challenges were difficulty in completing assignments and academic work on time (n=39; 34.2%), difficulty in completing an exam in the given time (n=27; 23.7%), difficulty in studying due to side effects of medications (n=16; 14.0%), and poor attendance (n=14; 12.3%). The majority (n=47; 41.2%) had financial difficulties. Only 18.4% (n=21) were aware of the existing facilities and university support systems for students with disabilities or chronic conditions. They desired better understanding and support from the faculty staff (14.9%) and strengthening of the facilities (10.5%) to overcome their challenges.

Conclusions: Exploring the concerns of undergraduates with disabilities and chronic illnesses is much needed to address their challenges, improve awareness of university support systems, and identify aspects of support needed by them to overcome their challenges.

Keywords: undergraduates, disabilities, chronic illness, university support system