

## **Occupational morbidities and their association with preventive practices among salt pan workers in Hambantota District, Sri Lanka**

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Salt production in Sri Lanka heavily relies on manual labour. Salt pan workers are constantly exposed to occupational health hazards such as sun exposure, physical strain and contact with brine, leading to many morbidities. Despite the risk, their health remains highly neglected in Sri Lanka. The aim of this study was to describe the occupational morbidities among salt pan workers in Sri Lanka and their association with preventive practices related to occupational health hazards. A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 140 salt pan workers in Hambantota District. Those with <1 year work experience, drivers and supervisors were excluded. Participants were selected using systematic sampling from the attendance register. Sociodemographic characteristics, use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and self-reported occupational morbidities were assessed using a validated interviewer-administered questionnaire. Hypertension was determined using a sphygmomanometer. Associations of occupational morbidities were assessed with preventive practices using chi-squared test at 5% significance level. The majority were males (58.4%) aged 40-49 years (37.6%) and educated up to Ordinary Level (56%). The most prevalent occupational morbidities were musculoskeletal problems (77.6%) followed by hypertension (40.8%), eye (40%), dermatological (22.4%) and respiratory (10.4%) problems. Low back pain, burning sensation in eyes, eczema and asthma were the most frequently reported within each category respectively. Among those who reported accidental injuries (26.4%), shovel injuries were the most common. As PPE, 96% workers used at least one protective measure, of which protective clothing was the most widely used (82.4%). Least used PPEs were face masks (16.8%) and protective sunglasses/goggles (18.4%). Non-use of protective-sunglasses/goggles was significantly associated with eye lacrimation ( $p=0.005$ ) and redness ( $p=0.011$ ). Salt pan workers experience a wide range of occupational morbidities affecting multiple body systems. The use of protective eye wear should be promoted to prevent eye-related morbidities.

**Keywords:** *Salt pan workers, Health hazards, Personal protective equipment*