

OP-10: The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on visually disabled persons in Sri Lanka and their suggestions for a better support system

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Introduction: Individuals with visual disabilities (VD) are under privileged and face many challenges in their daily lives. The aim of the current study was to describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with VD in Sri Lanka and their suggestions for a better support system.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study, using a telephone-based interviewer-administered questionnaire was carried out on fifty individuals with VD who were members of the Sri Lanka Federation for the Visually Handicapped or Sri Lanka Council of Visually Handicapped Graduates selected using convenient sampling. Suggestions for improvement were obtained by carrying out in depth interviews via telephone.

Results: Although 76% (n=38) identified N-95 masks as best for COVID-19 protection and 100% (n=50) identified that crowded places and touching surfaces used by public increased the risk of COVID-19 transmission, only 36% (n=18) knew that spread of COVID-19 occurs through air. Nearly 46% (n=23) found it challenging to secure transport to obtain medical services, while 22% (n=11) did not seek medical care due to fear of COVID-19. Majority (n=35; 70%) found not being able to touch surfaces challenging, while 50% (n=25) found maintaining social distancing a challenge. Majority (n=45; 90%) found financial issues a challenge. Nearly 30% (n=15) faced emotional violence during this period. All (n=50; 100%) stated that government policies, circulars and guidelines on COVID-19 did not pay attention to people with disabilities. A dedicated hotline for disabled persons, improved e-banking automatic teller machine facilities with read aloud option, providing educational, economic and counselling support for disabled persons were the suggestions for a better support system.

Conclusions: Although knowledge regarding COVID-19 was good, many challenges were identified that affected those with VD. Suggestions put forward should be taken into consideration to provide a better environment for them during future COVID-19 pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, visual disabilities, knowledge, visual challenges, visually handicapped