

Characteristics of Undergraduates Who Frequently Consult University Medical Officers, and Workload Generated by them

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Health of undergraduates, both physical and mental, is an important prerequisite to academic and personal development. In Sri Lanka, National Universities provide primary medical care to all internal students free of charge. As expected, students with suffering from chronic ailments such as asthma, eczema (recurrent skin rashes) have to consult frequently. However, it has been observed that some students with minor self-limiting ailments, consult University Medical Officers (UMOs) very frequently. In a telephone survey of 10 university medical officers 8 stated that they find it difficult to cope with the workload; students who consult frequently add substantially to the workload, and they are a considerable source of stress to them.

Aim of this prospective case control study is to assess the effect of frequent consultations on workload of UMOs, and to determine physical, psychological, socio-demographic and academic aspects of students who consult frequently (frequent consulters). Instruments used for data collection were a self-administered questionnaire for socio-demographic data, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) to assess psychological disturbance among the cases and controls, an encounter form to record findings of index consultations, and the students' medical records.

The top 10 % of consulters during the previous year were considered as frequent consulters (164 cases), and the others less frequent consulters (164 controls). At the first consultation (index consultation), during the study period of 6 months data was collected. Chi square was used to assess association between characteristics of frequent consulters and consultation frequency, and multiple logistic regressions was carried out to remove confounding effect of predictor variables. Significant associations with frequent consultation were being a first year student (OR=1.99); being away from home; cannabis use (OR=4.86); loss of love relationship (OR=3.38); being in employment while studying (OR=3.68); not practicing self care (OR=3.59) having a chronic illness (OR=3.59); high score on the GHQ (OR=4.04).

Frequent consulters contribute to 30% of UMOs, workload. Only 10% of frequent consulters suffered from chronic ailments which need frequent consultations. Apart from chronic diseases and psychological distress, there are other factors that account for frequent consultations unique to these young adults such as drug abuse, loss of love relationship.

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