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Paper: Equity

Knowledge of consent for sexual activity among Kelaniya University entrants: is it different depending on study stream?

A positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships is essential to a university entrant because 'age' coupled with 'free environment' gives many opportunities to obtain life experiences. Consent is an important concept in sexual relations and lack of knowledge can lead to unhealthy sexual practices and problems related to law.

The objective of this study is to assess the level of knowledge on 'consent for sexual activity' among different study streams of university entrants of Kelaniya University.

A cross-sectional, descriptive study was conducted from August to October 2009, based on self-administered questionnaires after obtaining approval from the Ethics Review Committee, Ragama. 150 students from each faculty (Medicine, Science, Commerce & Management, Social Sciences & Humanities) were randomly selected. Core knowledge was assessed by analysis of marks obtained for 7 questions.

The results demonstrate that the majority of the study population was above 20 years (86%) with male to female ratio of 1:1.6. 76% stated that they did not have any sexual experience while 10% had 'more than adequate experience for their age'. 73% (n=546) stated that consent is needed before sexual intercourse/any other sexual act, but lesser amount (57%) stated that it is needed once married. The knowledge of consenting age for sexual intercourse resulted in only 5% (n=40) giving the correct answer i.e. 16 years. The analysis of marks revealed that only 1.3% (n=10) get full marks for core knowledge while 63% of medical entrants had adequate knowledge. The least scored were Commerce and Management students (43%) while others scored between 50-59%. There was no significant difference among science and non science streams (p=0.121).

The study showed that the knowledge of consent for sexual intercourse among university entrants was poor and many were not aware of the legal age or basics of law related to the concept. Thus, a session on sexual health during the familiarization/orientation course will fill the gaps.