

## Do newspapers fulfil the demand for adolescent reproductive health?

**B. Kumarendran** MBBS

**Y.L.S. Nandasena** MBBS, MSc

**Chrishantha Abeysena** MBBS, MSc, MD

Department of Public Health,  
Faculty of Medicine,  
University of Kelaniya

### *Correspondence:*

Kumarendran B,  
Department of Public Health,  
Faculty of Medicine,  
University of Kelaniya,  
P.O. Box 6,  
Thalagolla Road,  
Ragama, Sri Lanka.

Tel: +94-11-295-3411

Fax: +94-11-295-8337

e-mail: drbkumaran@gmail.com

## Abstract

**Objective:** To describe the expectations of adolescent school children, perceptions of editorial staff and coverage of topics of articles published by selected Sinhala newspapers regarding reproductive health.

**Method:** Data were extracted from three national and three tabloid newspapers published during the period May to October 2007. Thematic analysis was done to analyse in-depth interviews of eleven editorial staff. One hundred and thirty four 17-18 year old school children were sampled using stratified (based on stream, sex and urban/rural) purposive sampling from the Gampaha district. Content analysis of 14 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) was done.

**Results:** Ninety two and 58 articles on reproductive health were published in national and tabloid papers respectively during the study period. Pregnancy related issues were the commonest topic addressed followed by reproductive system, commercial sex and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Most of the published articles included photographs. The majority was written with the guidance of professionally qualified doctors.

Although journalists knew the spectrum of reproductive health issues, they were more prone to write on STIs and less on homosexuality, virginity and family planning. The opportunities given for selecting a topic by the press authorities were not satisfactory. Adolescent girls were interested to read about puberty, menstruation, contraception, commercial sex, virginity and STIs and boys were interested to read about homosexuality, heterosexuality, masturbation, STIs, contraception and abortion. Most of the students claimed that they were not provided with adequate RH related knowledge by the newspapers. The way of presenting the articles was not satisfactory. Most of the adolescents preferred information in simple language (than scientific jargon) in question and answer form without seductive photographs.

**Conclusions:** Reproductive health coverage by newspapers are not satisfactory. Publishing articles to fulfil the expectations of adolescents would make newspapers a successful mode of RH education.

## Introduction

Adolescence is the period where changes in one's physical, psychological and social dimensions occur. These changes are mainly related to reproductive health (RH). Adolescents need to understand these changes during this period. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and the 2001 UN Special Session on AIDS affirmed the rights of young people to high-quality sexual and reproductive health information and services (Sundaram et al. 2004).

It is hypothesized that Sri Lankan adolescents do not get sufficient information on reproductive health from their parents or teachers, as discussing reproductive health issues are not culturally acceptable in Sri Lanka. Thus, adolescents in Sri Lanka depend mainly on the media to get information on RH.

Lack of knowledge of, poor attitudes towards, and unsafe practices related to reproductive health may lead to adverse consequences such as unwed or teenage pregnancies, septic abortions, rape, sexually transmitted infections and sexual malpractices. Providing quality information on RH will overcome these adverse consequences (FPASL, 2007).

Print newspapers are a major source of RH information. Though these newspapers carry RH messages, the quality of the information is debatable (Westwood & Westwood, 1999). Thus, there is a strong need to study the expectations of adolescents related to RH, the journalists' perception about adolescent reproductive health, the coverage of various aspects of RH in the newspapers, and the author characteristics. This study was undertaken to describe the fulfilment of the demand on adolescent reproductive health (ARH) by the print newspapers and to describe the perception of the editorial staff of the newspapers regarding their responsibility on provision of ARH information.

## Methods

**Study design:** This study was a qualitative study and comprised three components.

Component I: Quantitative analysis of reproductive health related articles in newspapers.

Component II: Qualitative study and in-depth interviews of editorial staff of the selected newspapers.

Component III: Qualitative study and focus group discussions with school children.

**Study setting:** - This study was conducted in the schools situated in the Gampaha district in Sri Lanka.

**Study population** - Adolescent school children and the editorial team of the print media were the participants in this study.

### ***Data collection***

#### ***Component I***

The first three most circulated National and tabloid newspapers published in the Sinhala language were selected. Selected newspapers published between May and October, 2007 were scrutinized and relevant data extracted. Quantitative analysis of reproductive health related articles was done.

#### ***Component II***

Five editorial staff members from national newspapers and six from tabloid papers were interviewed. All were engaged in writing health related articles. The in-depth interviews were facilitated by medical officers using a core questionnaire. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and thematic analysis was done.

#### ***Component III***

The third component comprised a qualitative study and focus group discussions with school children studying in Grade 13. Purposive sampling was used to select the schools. Fourteen schools were selected to include boys only, girls only and mixed schools from

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How far do the newspapers fulfil the demand on adolescent reproductive health?

rural and urban areas of the Gampaha District. Grade 13 classes in urban schools were stratified into two group viz. biology and non-biology streams. One division was selected from each study stream. If the grade was subdivided into divisions, one division was randomly selected from each study stream. Ten students from each division who volunteered to participate were selected. Ten boys and ten girls were selected in the same manner from mixed schools.

Table 1. Focus group discussions conducted among school children

Area	School	Stream	No: of FGDD
Urban area	Boys' school	Biology	1
		Non- Biology	1
	Girls' schools	Biology	1
		Non- Biology	1
	Mixed schools	Boys	1
		Girls	1
Rural area 1	Mixed schools	Biology (Boys)	1
		Non- Biology (Boys)	1
		Biology (Girls)	1
		Non- Biology (Girls)	1
Rural area 2	Mixed schools	Biology (Boys)	1
		Non- Biology (Boys)	1
		Biology (Girls)	1
		Non- Biology (Girls)	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>14</b>

### ***Development of Standard criterion***

A standard criterion on the expected content coverage of newspapers with regard to adolescent reproductive health was formulated via literature review. The responses of the students and the editorial staff were compared with this standard criterion.

### ***Data analysis***

Focus group discussions were qualitatively analysed. SPSS and Microsoft Access software packages were used in the data analysis.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The names of the participants were not documented during data collection. FGDs were conducted in a place with adequate privacy. Only the research assistants and the selected students participated in the FGD to minimise response bias. The FGDs were conducted separately for boys and girls. The names of the students were not documented during FGDs. The findings of the FGD were listed on a white sheet by a participant nominated by the group. The recordings of FGDs were deleted after transcription.

Informed written consent was taken from parents of school children and the editorial staff.

Clearance was obtained from the relevant government departments of education and health, and the newspaper authorities. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya.

## **Results**

### ***Documentary analysis of newspapers***

The analysis of publications of the selected national newspapers and tabloid newspapers on topics related to adolescent and reproductive health within a six month period are

given in Tables 2 and 3. There were 92 and 58 articles published in the selected national and tabloid newspapers, respectively. The commonest topic was on pregnancy. 84% and 72% of articles in national and tabloid newspapers respectively were written by doctors or consultants.

Table 2. Details of articles on adolescent and reproductive health published in selected national newspapers during the six month period under consideration.

Paper	Subject (most published)	Number of articles	Written by Medical officer or consultant		Presentation	
			Yes (%)	No (%)	Text only	Text + Photos
National paper I	Pregnancy	16	16(100%)	-	15	1
National paper II	Pregnancy	64	55(86%)	9(14%)	6	58
National paper III	STI	12	6(50%)	6(50%)	11	1
Total		92	77(84%)	15(16%)	35(35%)	60(65%)

Table 3. Details of articles on adolescent and reproductive health published in selected tabloid newspapers during the six month period under consideration.

Paper	Subject (most published)	Number of articles	Written by Medical officer or consultant		Presentation	
			Yes (%)	No (%)	Text only	Text + Photos
Tabloid paper I						
Tabloid paper II	Pregnancy	17	10(59%)	7(41%)	4	13
Tabloid paper III	Pregnancy	41	32(78%)	9(22%)	9	32
Total		58	42(72%)	16(28%)	13(22%)	45(78%)

### ***Reproductive health related advertisements***

The analysis of reproductive health related advertisements published in the selected national newspapers and tabloid newspapers within the six month period are given in

Table 4. Details of reproductive health related advertisements published in selected national newspapers during the six month period under consideration.

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Most appeared Topic</b>	<b>Target group</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
National paper I	Treatment for sexual problems	Male Female Both	1 (16%) - 5 (83%)
National paper II	Treatment for sexual problems	Male Female Both	87 (95%) 5 (5%) -
National paper III	Treatment for sexual problems	Male Female Both	13 (100%) - -

Table 5. Details of reproductive health related advertisements published in selected tabloid newspapers during the six month period under consideration.

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Most appeared Topic</b>	<b>Target group</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
Tabloid paper I	Treatment for sexual problems	Male Female Both	54 (56%) 1 (1%) 41 (43%)
Tabloid paper II	Treatment to enlarge breast	Male Female Both	- 11 (73%) 4 (27%)
Tabloid paper III	Treatment to enlarge breast	Male Female Both	1 (6%) 14 (77%) 3 (17%)
Total		Male Female Both	55 (43%) 26 (20%) 48 (37%)



Tables 4 and 5. The majority were published in the tabloid newspapers. The commonest topic was on treatment for sexual problems followed by breast enlargement for females.

### ***Sexual violence related news articles in national papers***

Forty seven percent of articles related to reproductive health that appeared in the selected national newspapers were on sexual violence (Table 6).

Table 6. Distribution of articles related to sexual violence in selected national newspapers during the six month period under consideration.

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Number of articles related to sexual violence</b>	<b>Number of articles related to RH</b>	<b>% of articles related to sexual violence</b>
National paper I	74	122	60 %
National paper II	37	70	53 %
National paper III	42	133	32 %
Total	153	325	47 %

### ***Focus group discussions with adolescent students***

#### ***Widely read papers***

In all focus groups irrespective of location and study stream (biology and non-biology), the majority of the students claimed that they had opportunity to read national papers as compared to tabloid papers. The type of the paper read depended on the availability of the paper at their proximity.

### ***Content areas read from newspapers***

Most participants in all focus groups claimed that their expectations were not fulfilled by the newspapers. The format of presentation of information in the papers was not satisfactory. For example, the presence of seductive photos embarrasses and discourages them from reading reproductive health related articles at home or in school. Although there were articles on adolescent reproductive health in the newspapers, many of them did not adequately fulfill their requirements.

### ***Content area expected from the news papers***

#### ***Males***

There were no differences in the content area expected from the newspapers among the male students by subject stream or by area of residence (rural and urban). Masturbation related information was invariably expected from most of the members of male focus groups. Sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality, contraception, menstruation, virginity, sub-fertility, puberty, reproductive system, commercial sex and life skills were the content area expected from the news papers among the male students.

#### ***Females***

Information related to contraception, menstruation, puberty, commercial sex, virginity and sexually transmitted diseases were expected by the girls from the print media. The details related to conception were requested more by non-biology students in both rural and urban locations.

### ***Preferred format of printed information***

The majority of the participants responded that the information related to adolescent reproductive health should be published as a supplement of a national newspaper or else as an educational paper. Articles without seductive photos were preferred as it would facilitate reading at home and in school.

A question and answer form of presentation was suggested as a reader friendly format. A series of articles on adolescent reproductive health regularly published in the newspaper in a separate page was preferred. The participants, mainly the non-biology students, found it difficult to understand the usage of scientific technical terms in the articles and preferred it in layman's language. Many groups discussed the need of articles which could facilitate them to manage their emotions and to improve their life skills. Lack of proper information related to reproductive health had led school children to gather information through pornography such as yellow papers and blue films.

Although, illegal pornographic papers were not freely available for students, they were available in cities widely. Students preferred blue films to pornographic papers. Boys claimed that they watched blue films more frequently when they were in grades 9 and 10.

### ***In-depth interviews of newspaper editorial staff***

#### ***Attitudes of journalists towards providing information related to reproductive health***

All journalists believed that reproductive health related articles were important. One journalist stated "It's an important subject for young people. We should publish these articles in a manner that is acceptable to all family members". Others confirmed this sentiment. The editorial staff was able to name all the important areas of reproductive health. Many claimed that they wish to write on areas such as STD/AIDS. They stated that family planning, homosexuality, virginity and any article which leads to sexual arousal were the areas which were less likely to be written.

#### ***Main problems faced in writing reproductive health related articles***

Limitation in getting enough space in the newspapers leads the press authority not to publish the reproductive health related articles. There were some limitations in using the appropriate words.

A journalist claimed “I was asked to remove some words such as ‘virginity’ and ‘vagina’ from one of my articles”. There were problems in accessing and in getting adequate time to discuss with medical officers.

## Discussion

Adolescent sexual and reproductive health is becoming a priority due to many reasons. Lule et al. (2007) states that in developing countries, the consequences of sexual and reproductive health conditions affect men and women differently. Sexual and reproductive health conditions account for 33 percent of young women’s DALYs, much higher than the 10 percent for young men. The Indonesian Ministry of Health reports that data from existing studies clearly indicate that adolescents are at risk of reproductive health issues as their age of first marriage increases along with social changes and exposure to the mass media, as well as to the effects of modernization in general (IMOH, 2003).

The results of this study indicate that the spectrum of reproductive health issues covered by newspapers is not satisfactory. Articles related to adolescent reproductive health should be written with consideration to expectations of adolescents. Lule et al. (2007) reported that in the most recent surveys carried out in LMICs, high proportions of adolescents state that they have heard of contraceptive methods; however, little is known about the quality and accuracy of young people’s knowledge of contraception. Similar sentiments were expressed by adolescents during the FGDs.

Agampodi, Agampodi & Piyaseeli, (2008) reported that psychological distresses due to various reasons and problems regarding menstrual cycle and masturbation were cited as the commonest health problems among adolescents. They identified problems regarding menstrual cycle as the commonest reproductive health problem among girls. Among boys, the main reproductive health problem discussed was related to masturbation.

Yakandawala (2007) reported that nearly 70% of adolescents do not believe that bathing and eating oily food and animal protein during menarche and menstruation should be stopped. In our FGDs, approximately 30% expressed doubts in these aspects.

Although journalists had a positive attitude towards the provision of information related to reproductive health, they face various limitations to do so. Newspapers could be used as a successful mode of reproductive health education, if used appropriately. However, Yakandawala (2007) reports that teachers, friends, radio, television and printed materials are the common sources of information for STI and HIV/AIDS and recommends the use of mass media more to interact with young people on SRH rather than being the prime source of knowledge. Karunarathne (2007) concluded that school teachers have a good potential to provide essential reproductive and sexual health information to adolescents.

Agampodi, Agampodi & Piyaseeli, (2008) report that girls generally preferred advice from the mother especially for minor problems. In their study, few girls indicated that they could discuss any matter with their mothers while the majority sought advice from their best friends. Only one participant reported that she could discuss reproductive health problems with a teacher. Most of the adolescent girls disagreed and said that they had no trust in teachers regarding these matters. Boys agreed unanimously that they did not discuss these problems with parents or teachers. They described that for minor problems they consulted their friends; for major problems, they were reluctant to even consult their friends. Hence, the role of the media becomes even more important.

We collected data for girls and boys separately. As Ingham (1999) recommends individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to obtain relevant data on the meaning, identities and contexts associated with sexual behaviour among young people.

Although this study focused on children attending schools in the Gamapaha District, the expectations of many school children in the country are likely to be similar. It is also assumed that the content areas of such articles appearing in other newspapers and tabloid papers are similar to the ones included in this study.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that the print media should cater to the needs of adolescents with the guidance of qualified experts.

Journalists' access to updated information on ASRH should be widened through a resource pool of medical experts.

The journalists, publishers and medical experts should engage in a discourse on how to present ASRH information to the target population.

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