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HBV AND HIV SEROPOSITIVITY, KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, PRACTICES ON DISEASE TRANSMISSION AMONG FUNERAL INDUSTRY WORKERS IN SELECTED DISTRICTS OF SRI LANKA

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Exposure to body fluids and other clinical material pose a clear risk of infection for those involved in the process of embalming and cadaver handling

A descriptive cross sectional study was carried out among funeral industry workers in Colombo, Gampaha and Matara districts in 2014. A 5 ml blood sample was collected from each participant and tested for the presence of Hepatitis B surface antibody (Anti HBs) and Anti HIV antibodies using enzyme linked immunosorbant assay and rapid immunochromatography assay respectively. Data was collected using an interviewer administered questionnaire. Knowledge, attitudes and practices on prevention of disease transmission while cadaver handling and knowledge and attitudes on funeral industry related infectious hazards were assessed using 57 and 29 questions respectively. A score of 1 was given for each correct response, attitude or practice. A total score of more than 75% was considered good, 50-74% moderate and less than 50% poor for each category

The study included 70 participants employed as embalmers (n=41, 59%) and helpers (n=29, 41%). Majority of the participants (n=47, 67%) had been employed for >10 years of the 70 participants, 4 (7.1%) individuals with no history of vaccination were positive for antibody against Hepatitis B surface antigen indicating that they were exposed to the infection. None were positive for antibody against HIV. The participants had an overall moderate knowledge (52%), poor attitudes (42%), and moderate practices (53%) with regard to disease transmission during embalming and cadaver handling. Sixteen (23%) and 37 (53%) knew that infected cadavers could transmit HBV and HIV respectively. Only 15 (21%) and 7(10%) identified that HIV and HBV infected bodies should not be embalmed. While 66 (94%) were unaware of the HBV vaccine, 21% of the respondents were of the attitude that it is important. The use of personal protective equipment was poor, but 84% claimed to use gloves during embalming. None had received formal training in cadaver handling and infection control. However all respondents wanted to obtain professional training in this regard.

Majority of the funeral industry workers are at risk of occupational exposure to HBV and HIV. Formal training programs and guidelines are needed to improve the embalming practices and reduce the possibility of occupational infections in this group.

Keywords: HBV, HIV, funeral industry, embalmers and infection control