DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY AMONG CHILDREN IN URBAN SRI LANKA

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Childhood obesity is a multidimensional health problem. Globally, it is estimated that school children up to 200 millions are either overweight/obese (IASO/IOTF, 2010). The prevalence of obesity is lower in Asia than in Africa (4.9% in 2010). But the number of affected children (18 million) is higher in Asia (WHO, 2010). The prevalence of overweight/obesity is about 13% among urban children, aged 5-15, in Sri Lanka (Wickramasinghe et al., 2013).

The objective of this study was to identify the underlying socio-cultural and behavioural factors responsible for overweight/obesity in children in the urban setting of Sri Lanka. A qualitative descriptive study has been conducted at the Paediatric Obesity Clinic, Lady Ridgeway Hospital (LRH), Colombo from April to December, 2012. The first 100 overweight/obese children, aged 5-12 years, who attended the clinic from Colombo district were recruited prospectively from the clinic register. A pre-tested interviewer-administered-questionnaire and focus group discussions were used for data collection. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS. Thematic analysis was performed on qualitative data. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Committees of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo and LRH.

The study sample (n=100) comprised of 64 boys; median age was 10 years (1.9 SD); 74% (27 girls and 47 boys) was obese with a mean BMI of 23.89kg/m². The majority belonged to the upper middle class. No relationship was seen between mothers’ employment and development of obesity. Both male and female children have equal exposure to fast/junk foods. Mean TV viewing (16.6 hours/week) and video games playing (2.65 hours/week) times were significantly associated with obesity. Grade five-scholarship examination and less physical activities have significant inter-relationship with childhood obesity. Attending private tuition classes after school (mean 6.60 hours/week) and spending time on academic activities at home (mean 9.03 hours/week) are high quite frequent due to parents’ influence. Physical inactivity (mean 4.1% hours/week) is high among children with obesity. Overweight children also had a similar distribution in these risk factors and did not show a significant difference when compared with obese children. 73% of children used TV advertisements when selecting foods. These findings show that obese children’s addiction to cartoon programmes and gullibility to food commercials could predispose them to develop obesity.

A positive association between overweight/obesity and sedentary life-style, including less physical activity, was seen. Provisions of community participatory preventive actions are important for the prevention of overweight/obesity. Empowering community/individuals on proper interpretation of food commercials and structuring sedentary behaviour patterns and incorporating adequate physical activities in school and day to day life could be recommended.