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Unilateral lower limb disability associated with musculoskeletal disorders and its impact on employment among a group of urban community dwelling residents in Sri Lanka

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Introduction: Employment rates of people with lower limb disabilities are lower than that of the overall population. Persons with lower limb disabilities like to work equally with others to gain a living. However, they need job opportunities and vocational training. Jobs involving fine movements and skills are grossly affected by lower limb disability.

Objective: This study aims at describing the impact of lower limb disability associated with musculoskeletal disorders and its effects on employment among the community dwelling residents in urban Sri Lanka.

Method: A qualitative study was done among adults aged 18 to 59 years including both males (n=5) and females (n=7) with unilateral lower limb disability in Kandy Municipal Council area in Central Sri Lanka. In-depth interviews were conducted based on a structured in-depth interview guide based on a conceptual framework produced using a literature review and expert panel opinions. Unilateral lower limb disability was identified using a clinical examination and World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule II. Informed written consent was obtained from all study participants and ethical approval was granted by the Ethical Review Committee of University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

Results: The persons with lower limb disability were engaged in various types of employment: teaching, selling vegetables, selling sweep tickets, making flower pots, art and craft work, driving, computer repair etc. Majority were engaged in self-employment rather than government or private sector employment. Selection of type of employment was mainly affected by their limb disability status: site of lower limb disability, severity and physical appearance. Further it was affected by geographic location of residence and place of work, transportation to and from the work place, accessibility to buildings, rest rooms and tea shops, attitudes of the employees, individual education status and social stigma. Self-employed persons revealed that, no strict adherence to rules and regulations, less travelling and limited social interactions led them to their choice of employment type. Many did not have proper vocational training which is essential for a reasonably paid productive work while two had changed their jobs frequently displaying inability to maintain and secure the employment. Still, people with limb disability try to be employed as it directly affects their income. Majority had been employed prior to the onset of lower limb disability. They had to get more leave; some had to change to a different job to maintain their employment status while some quit their jobs.

Conclusions and recommendations: Considering the types of employment of people with lower limb disability, many are engaged in the informal economy with a considerable number engaged in self-employment. Factors affecting employment of the persons with lower limb disability need to be addressed both at individual and community level in Sri Lanka together with launching disability and employment awareness programmes for the public.

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