

The Pattern of Repetition of Self-Harm Among Prospectively Observed Poisoning Patients in Sri Lanka

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Objective : Suicide is a major cause of premature mortality worldwide. Some of the characteristics of suicide in the Asian region, where most of the World's suicides occur, appear to differ from those in the West. One of the most important components of suicide prevention strategies is to target people who repeat self-harm as they are at high risk group, yet there is some evidence that the incidence of repeat self-harm is low in Asia compared to that reported in the West (30-50%). We examine the prevalence of previous self-harm among a series of self-poisoning patients who presented to two poisons research units in Sri Lanka. **Methods** : All self-poisoning patients presenting to medical wards of the two hospitals were interviewed about their previous episodes of self-harm by study doctors. **Results** : Our analysis is based on 698 patients; 352 (50.4%) were female. The median age of the study group was 24 (IQR 19-35). The most common methods of self-poisoning were the ingestion of pharmaceuticals (27%), oleander (17%), and organophosphorus compounds (17%). We found 61 (8.7%) cases reported at least one previous deliberate self-harm history (37 M; 24 F) before the current attempt; only 19 patients had made more than one previous attempt. **Conclusion** : The low levels of previous self-harm in our subjects are consistent with figures reported in previous studies conducted in Asia and are far lower than those reported in the West. Explanations for these low levels of repeat self-harm require investigation. Our data indicate that a focus on the aftercare of those who attempt suicide in Sri Lanka may have a smaller impact on suicide than may be possible in the West.