

IS KNOWLEDGE ON “MEDICO-LEGAL ASPECTS OF CHILD ABUSE” ADEQUATE AMONG POLICE OFFICERS?

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INTRODUCTION

Child abuse (CA), which is a worldwide phenomena¹, continues to be a major crisis in the current society. It is defined as child maltreatment including any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that result in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child².

Abuse of children can be divided into 4 main types: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and emotional and psychological abuse which may coexist³. Kempe, identified physical abuse of children and assigned the specific name ‘battered child syndrome’ in 1962⁴. Nonetheless it was only in 1980s that sexual abuse of a child, which is not a novel problem⁵ was identified as a problem in the western society⁶. In response, law-makers throughout the world have responded in different ways to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice⁵.

Diagnosis and management of child abuse is difficult⁵ and has to be done with a multidisciplinary approach involving police officers, medical professionals, as well as legal professionals^{7, 8}. Therefore, precise knowledge on the subject of child abuse among these personnel is essential. In our experience, police officers play a vital role in management of child abuse in Sri Lanka.

Interactions between the abused child, Judicial Medical Officer (JMO) and the court have almost always been handled by a police officer. Hence it is exceedingly important for police officers to be thoroughly acquainted on medico-legal aspects of child abuse. Incidents of child abuse and neglect often said to go undetected because police or other first responders coming into contact with children do not identify injuries, conditions, or behaviors as suspicious⁹. When no intervention is offered, an abused child has up to a 10 per cent risk of having eventually fatal injuries¹⁰.

The unavailability of Sri Lankan research literature with reference to awareness of police officers about medico-legal issues of child abuse together

with apparent lack of their knowledge on the subject have inspired us to conduct this study.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study was to ascertain the knowledge among police officers, who are more than 10 years in police service, in central province, regarding the essential medico-legal aspects of child abuse.

METHODOLOGY

We have identified 3 major areas with reference to medico-legal aspects of child abuse in which police officers need to be aware of adequately. Hence we have structured questions to cover those broad areas beginning from *legally accepted age limit for definition of a child* since ‘age’ is a key element in several offences concerning children.

Second aspect is *types and features of child abuse* which includes awareness of physical, sexual abuse, neglect and how to look for evidence during investigation of a case.

Thirdly with regards to his *duty as a police officer and the duty towards JMO*, he needs to be thoroughly familiar with procedures including obtaining the statements, documentation, collecting evidence and informing relevant professionals who are involved in management of child abuse, to handle the process early and effectively.

A randomly selected sample of 196 police officers was provided with a questionnaire on above aspects, following a brief introduction and subsequent to obtaining their consent. Marks were given out of hundred for each area and the results were analyzed.

RESULTS

The study sample consisted of 60 male police officers, 89 female police officers and rest 47 were unmarked. Their number according to their ranks is as follows:

Post	CI	IP	SI	PS	PC	Unmarked
Number	8	22	32	26	61	47

CI = Chief Inspector IP = Inspector SI = Sub Inspector PS = Police Sergeant PC = Police Constable.

First aspect of our study was to ascertain the awareness of age limit. Out of the total study sample of 196, 75.5% have responded with the exact age limit to be known as a 'child', which is shown on the figure 01. However 24.5% of the sample was not aware of the correct age limit.

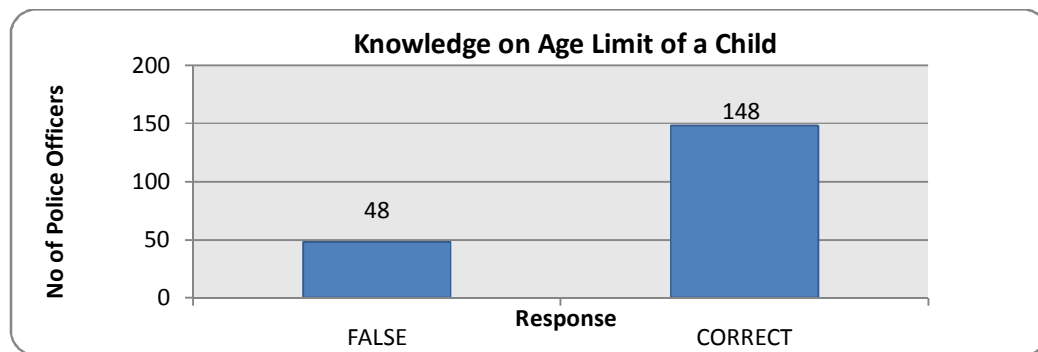


Figure 01: Knowledge on Age Limit of a child

Out of the total study sample of 196, 95% got less than 75% and 59% had marks 50% and below for knowledge on types of child abuse. Remarkably 7% got marks between 0 to 25% which is pointed up in figure 02. Only 5% managed to get marks above 75%.

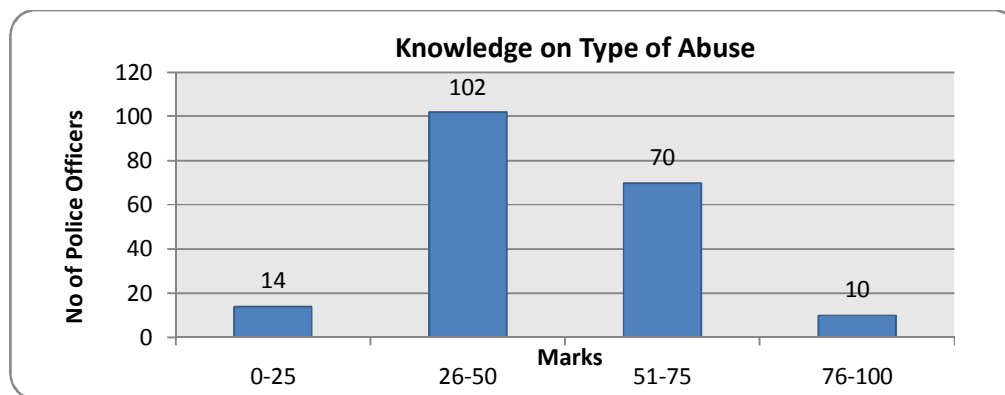


Figure 02: Knowledge on Type of Abuse

Out of the total study sample of 196, 86% got 75% and below marks for features of child abuse as shown in figure 03. 54% were 50% and less aware of the features of child abuse. 4% received zero marks for knowledge on features of child abuse.

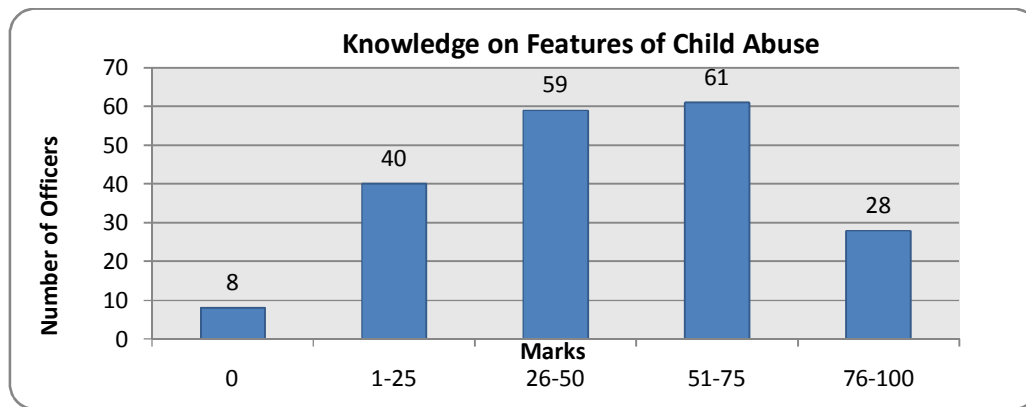


Figure 03: Knowledge on Features of Child Abuse

Out of the total study sample of 196, 31% scored equal and less than 75% marks for their duty in management of child abuse. 3% were 50% and less aware of their own duty as illustrated on figure 04. 1% was 25% and less aware of their duty in handling child abuse.

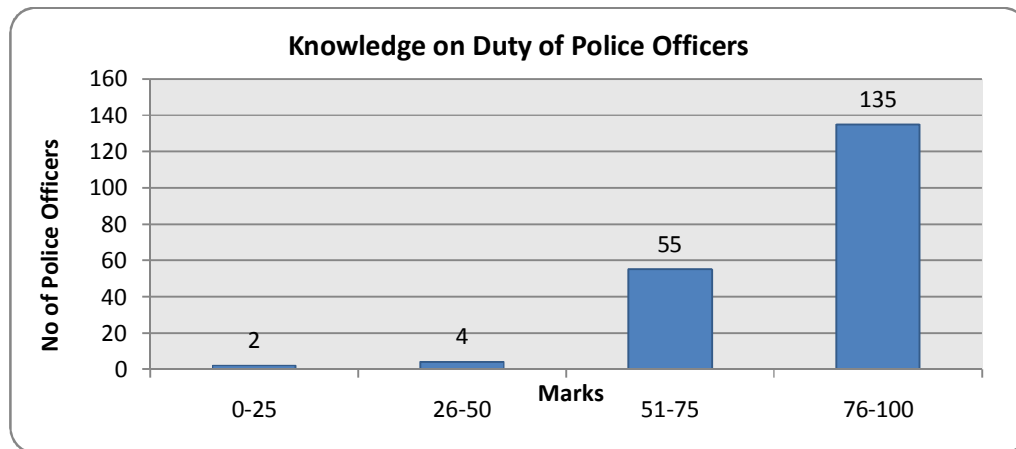


Figure 04: Knowledge on Duty of Police Officers

Out of the total study sample of 196, 2% got zero marks regarding their duty towards JMO. 74% had 75% and below marks. 36% scored 50% and less and 1% was found to have zero knowledge on their duty towards the JMOs. See figure 05.

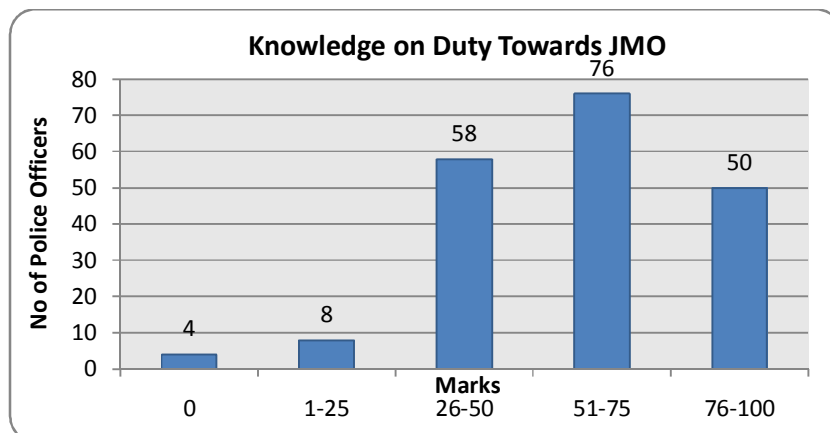


Figure 05: Knowledge on Duty towards JMO

DISCUSSION

It is mandatory for the people who are involved in management of child abuse to be thoroughly aware of medico-legal aspects to execute justice. Deficiency of knowledge may ultimately lead to injustice to assailant as well as the victim.

Out of the total study sample of 196, 75.5% had responded with the exact age limit to be known as a child. 24.5% were not aware of the correct age limit, which can be considered as a serious imperfection in their career.

Out of the total study sample of 196, 95% got less than 75% marks and 59% had marks 50% and below for knowledge on types of child abuse; 86% got 75% and below marks for features of child abuse. 54% were 50% and less aware of the features of child abuse.

Out of the total study sample of 196, 31% scored equal and less than 75% marks for their duty in investigation of child abuse. 3% were 50% and less aware of their own duty. 2% got zero marks regarding their duty towards JMO. 74% had 75% and below marks. 36% scored 50% and less.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although more than 50% of the study group had above 50% knowledge in all the aspects of child abuse, more than half of the total study sample had below 75% knowledge regarding the essential aspects of CA.

SUGGESTIONS

Following our study we suggest the need to emphasize this topic in the basic training curriculum of police officers especially with regard to types and features of child abuse and the police officers' duty towards JMOs. However to be worthwhile, it is better to conduct continuous education programs or workshops on awareness of medico-legal issues concerning child abuse to the police officers who are frequently involved in management of child abuse.

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