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Alcohol Use is Becoming a Socially Acceptable Behaviour among Sri Lankan Undergraduates: Whither Prevention

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Background: Alcohol use has been a male habit in Sri Lanka, and females were less likely to use alcohol because alcohol use by women has been a social taboo in the country. However, current changes in socio-cultural value systems in the country have affected many social and religious customs including social image of alcohol use that could result in increasing the prevalence of alcohol use in undergraduates.

Objectives: To examine the prevalence and the determinants of alcohol use by gender among university undergraduates in selected faculties in University of Ruhuna

Methods: This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among undergraduates of the Faculties of Agriculture (FoA), Allied Health Sciences (FAHS) and Engineering (FoE) in the University of Ruhuna (UoR), Sri Lanka. Data related to socio-demographic characteristics, frequency and quantity of alcohol use and personal, environmental and socio-cultural factors associated with alcohol use were collected using Google forms. Yearly alcohol use was defined as use of any form of alcohol at least once in the last 12 months.

Results: A total of 505 undergraduates were surveyed (52.5% were males). The prevalences of yearly alcohol use of male and female undergraduates were 55.5% (95% CI was 49.5%, 61.5%) and 11.3% (95% CI was 7.3%, 15.3%), respectively ($p<0.05$). Among yearly alcohol users, 46.9% of male and 70.4% of female users ($p<0.05$) reported that they had their first drink during their university life. Significantly a higher proportion of females compared to males ($p<0.05$) in FoA (50.0% vs. 39.7%) and FAHS (63.6% vs. 46.4%) reported that they use alcohol for recreational purposes, however in the FoE the opposite was observed (33.3% vs. 54.2%).

Conclusions: Alcohol usage among female undergraduates is becoming a significant public health issue challenging the alcohol control policies in the university system. Prevention activities should focus on how to encounter alcohol use among university undergraduates by examining the availability and accessibility of alcohol products in university premises for university recreational and other social events, and by implementing appropriate control policies.

Keywords: *Alcohol usage, Prevalence, Undergraduates, University of Ruhuna*