

What the Sinhala newspapers publish on care of the skin

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Abstract

Health education is a powerful tool that could change the health behaviour of an individual. It is widely carried out through the Sinhala print media, which have a wide circulation. A large number of articles are found on maintenance of healthy skin and self care of common skin problems.

The objective of this study was to identify the areas covered, the quality of information and the deficiencies that are found in the articles.

An information quality tool was formulated with criteria such as sources of information, credentials, accuracy, currency and readability. These were checked for all articles related to the skin, which appeared in 611 newspapers. Of the 172 articles related to skin care, only 8 (4.7%) were written by dermatologists. Only 71% carried accurate information. 7% carried potentially dangerous information. Most were well written but carried irrelevant illustrations.

Overall the quality of information on skin problems was poor.

Introduction

Sinhala newspapers and magazines provide access to an enormous volume and a broad variety of health information about keeping the skin healthy, beautiful and for treatment of common as well as incurable skin problems. Alternative health approaches and a variety of plants and their products claimed to have properties of healing the diseased skin have also been recently published specially through the Sinhala print media. However, the information provided seems to vary from leading experts in the field with excellent documentation and references, to those who promote their products seeking self-promotion. The articles are not screened for the quality of information prior to publication.

Thus, the main objective of this study was to identify the number and the variety of health messages on skin care and check them for quality using a set of indicators developed by the investigators.

Method

Thirty-three newspapers including magazines printed in Sinhala that were registered were purchased over a period of 14 weeks from July to October 2001. At the beginning of the project, an information quality tool in the form of a checklist was made¹. This was done with reference to a similar tool used for the publications in the internet⁵. All newspapers were perused by research assistants for those articles on health information. These were cut and pasted on half sheets of paper and filed with a serial number according to the subject area. Skin care was one of 30 areas on which there were publications. The chief investigator and the research assistants who were trained, checked all articles using the information quality tool. The checklist is shown in Table 1. Discussions were held with a consultant dermatologist to ascertain the extent of agreement on the completed checklists. 20 articles selected using random number tables were used for this purpose. The data were analysed using a SPSS package.

Table 1. Quality of information

Total no. of articles - 170	
	%
Source of information disclosed	97.6
Credentials of authors given	15.8
Qualified in the field	31.6
Conflict of interest	
Advertisement side by side	4.1
Totally advertising a product	3.5
Totally advertising a treatment	3.5
Self promotion	4.1
Current information	32.7
Accurate information	71.4
Potentially dangerous information	7.0
Disclaimer present	28.6

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Results

In all 611 newspapers were purchased. Weekend papers carried majority of information on skin care. Out of the 1078 articles of health education, 172 were on skin care. This accounted for the highest number of articles on skin problems out of the 30 areas listed. A large number of articles were on improving the cosmetic appearance of the skin generally with the use of preparations made from locally available herbs. Also remedies for nearly all the common skin diseases were published (Table 2).

Table 2. Common areas covered by the articles

- Cosmetic skin and hair care
- Common diseases - Acne
 - Scalp dandruff (pityriasis capitis)
 - Eczema
 - Infections
 - Vitiligo
 - Psoriasis
 - Alopecias

The source of information was disclosed in 166 (97.1%) of the articles (Table 1). Of these only 8 (4.7%) were written by dermatologists (Table 3). A large number of articles were written by beauticians themselves or by journalists after interviewing a beautician (Table 3). Qualifications were given in only 27 (15.8%) articles. Some were well known personalities and we found that in 54 (31.6%) authors were qualified to give the information they gave. An advertisement of a skin medication was found by the side of an article in 4.1%. In another 3%, the article was written solely to advertise the product. In 3.5% articles the author advertised a treatment generally for a chronic skin disease. In another 4.1% it was total self-promotion. Thus in 13% articles it was self promotion to a greater or a lesser extent. Current information was found only in 32.7% articles. Accuracy of information was checked only for 35 articles based on western medicine. And 71.4% of the articles carried accurate information. Potentially dangerous information was seen in 7% of the remaining 122 articles. These were not based on western medicine and included false reassurances without a disclaimer, use of herbs without any specific data to support their use, applications that are unhygienically prepared for local application on raw areas, guaranteed cures for diseases where there is no known cure (Table 4). A disclaimer as to where self care should end and treatment from a professional sought was given only in 28.6% articles. Majority of the articles were written clearly with

relevance to the topic but 33% carried irrelevant illustrations (Table 5).

Table 3. Authorship of articles

Total no. of articles - 168		
Source of information	Number of Articles	%
Western Medical Doctor (Dermatologists)	08	4.8
Ayurvedic Doctor	14	8.3
Reputed Health Organization	01	0.6
Expert in the field	22	13.1
Journalist	61	36.3
Interviewer based	55	32.7
Based on an article/publication	07	4.2
Total	100	100

Table 4. Claims of cure and prevention by ancient remedies

Vitiligo
Psoriasis
Premature grey hair

Table 5. Readability

Total no. of articles - 170		%
Relevant to the topic		
Yes		94.7
No		5.3
Illustrations		
Present and relevant		43.9
Present and not relevant		33.3
Not present		22.8
Clarity of writing		
Good		38.6
Satisfactory		57.3
Poor		4.1

Discussion

It is accepted that health education is a powerful intervention for improving the health status of individuals and communities. However, the ultimate outcome of health education, which is behaviour change by person, or persons concerned depend on the material provided as well as the motivation on the part of the recipient.

The skin has an enormous impact on the physical, social and psychological health and quality of life of an individual since skin is a visible organ. Even the colour of the skin has its own implications for ethnicity and race. Of such is its importance that a large variety of medications and applications are available to enhance its appearance and vitality. Also the disorders of skin include a wide range of problems from loss of hair to fissuring of soles of feet. Thus it was not surprising that the highest percentage of articles were devoted to skin care.

The quality of information given regarding problems related to the skin do not meet the required standards used to check quality of publication. The sources of information, their credentials, the accuracy of information given was found to be below standard as shown by the results^{1,3,4,5}, (Table 1). In addition potentially dangerous information was found to be conveyed to the public. Media has also been used to advertise products for chronic skin diseases with no known cure at present.

Soliciting articles from people who are not qualified to give information, journalists writing articles after short interviews with experts who are not given their articles to proof read, lack of editorial boards seem to be the principal factor contributing to the poor outcome of information.

Consumer satisfaction as shown by the island-wide distribution of newspapers and the appearance of a large number of articles does not guarantee quality. Good quality information is the right of the people and they are entitled to an acceptable level of good health information.

The articles were well written but supplemented with eye catching illustrations. This would ensure that

information is widely read and the dissemination of inaccurate information too is wide.

Conclusions and recommendations

The quality of information on skin care is not satisfactory. Most of the articles were directed at enhancing skin appearance and self-care for common skin problems without a disclaimer. In addition, a large number of articles were by beauticians.

We suggest that more medically qualified people participate in educating the public through Sinhala print media and the interviewed medical personnel have a method of reviewing articles before publication.

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