

**Leading Article**

## සූදු-කථ-තලෙලු අපි ඔක්කොම දැනුම්කථ - Public awareness campaign to educate on health hazards of skin whitening

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Since the advent of colonialism on the island to the present day, fair skin has defined the standard of beauty and supremacy in Sri Lanka. Some cosmetic companies have spent millions of dollars to strengthen this concept and take advantage of this sociocultural belief. They have sponsored large-scale unethical marketing campaigns that have ingrained the necessity of fairer skin for success in one's career or personal life. As a result, the belief that fair skin is inherently superior to dark skin has become deeply rooted in a country with a primarily dark-skinned population. This concept of colourism has led to workplace discrimination, low self-esteem, body shaming and other psychosocial issues.

As a result, the demand for skin whitening in the local community has increased widely.

To cater to this rising demand, skin-lightening agents claiming to give 'instant' results are flooding the market. Unfortunately, most skin-lightening agents available in the market are neither regulated nor controlled adequately. Due to the lapses in the regulatory process of cosmetics registration, many harmful skin-lightening agents have freely flowed into the country. Although the registration process is now undergoing an overhaul, there are still no post-market surveillance or laboratory facilities for checking for harmful ingredients.

A study on chemical constituents of over-the-counter whitening products has revealed high mercury concentrations<sup>1</sup>. As stated in this study, out of 46 samples tested 25 creams contained high levels of mercury, even as high as 30,000.167 particles per million (ppm) when the regulatory cut off should be less than 1 ppm. No warning was provided on the label or information leaflet. In comparison to the level for tolerable daily intake given by the WHO (World Health Organization), which is set at 2 µg/kg of body

weight per day for total mercury intake, all these samples contained hazardous levels of mercury.

High concentrations of hydroquinone and potent steroids are other suspected harmful ingredients in skin-lightening creams. It is a common practice at beauty parlours to sell locally prepared skin-lightening creams that are mixtures of potent steroids. As a result, the dermatological community of Sri Lanka has noticed a drastic increase in the frequency of consultations due to adverse effects of skin-lightening agents usage in recent years.

Hyper and hypopigmented macules and contact dermatitis are among the side effects of skin-lightening products. Skin atrophy, striae, persistent erythema and acne are skin-related side effects seen due to the application of non-registered cosmetics which are suspected to contain potent steroids<sup>2,3</sup>. We also fear that the wide usage of skin-lightening agents in a tropical country like Sri Lanka may cause long-term complications such as photosensitivity and increased risk of skin cancer. In addition, heavy metals in skin whitening agents can cause serious side effects in different internal organs through systemic absorption.

Skin whitening agents are not limited to topical applications. Intravenous glutathione, which does not have regulatory permission to be marketed as a skin-lightening product, is widely used in the country and often administered by non-qualified personnel in unhygienic setups.

The number of patients requesting dermatological consultations to achieve the desired light skin tone is rising. Many individuals suffering from low self-esteem and psycho-social issues because of their dark skin tones are also encountered in our day-to-day practice. We have met parents obsessed with the potential colour of their baby's skin to the point of requesting medication to whiten their infant's skin.

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Some mothers even consume oral skin-whitening tablets during pregnancy, hoping to grant their children a lighter skin tone. Sadly this is only a preview of the true dimensions of the problem. As most medications are obtained over the counter or at beauty parlours, we dermatologists can only witness a small fraction of the physical, mental and social ill-effects of the use of 'fairness' products.

As a response to this situation, the health hazards associated with skin whitening agents were identified as a prevalent health problem in the country by the Cosmetic Dermatology Subcommittee of the Sri Lanka College of Dermatologists (SLCD).

While a significant proportion of the population was affected to varying extents, we determined that the issue was more widespread among the female and young populace<sup>2-4</sup>. Notably, they are the audience more susceptible to the unethical marketing strategies

of the individuals and agencies who promote skin whitening rather than skin health.

We realized that tightening regulatory processes was neither a permanent nor a failsafe solution. The inferiority felt by the dark-skinned population made them the ideal targets of the beauty industry, which further augmented the situation through propaganda surrounding fair skin. Hence, to truly eliminate any risk from fairness-inducing agents, we must address its root cause.

Therefore, as the authority responsible for the skin health of the public, the Cosmetic Dermatology Subcommittee of SLCD took the initiative to launch the project "The Colour of Beauty is the Colour you Own?", rephrasing in Sinhala "සුදු-කළු-තලෙලු අපි ඔක්කොම දැකුවේකලු" interpreted as "every colour is beautiful".



Our project primarily aimed to promote one's natural colour and change the attitude of the youth towards the social construction of beauty. Additionally, the project intended to educate the public on the health hazards of skin-lightening agents while empowering them with correct knowledge about skincare and skin health. We believe our project will help people improve their self-confidence, reduce discrimination and create a future generation less susceptible to misinformation.

The programme "The Colour of Beauty is the Colour You Own" was launched on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2022.

This public awareness program involved many stakeholders. In addition to the members of the SLCD, other medical professionals such as psychiatrists, oncologists and officials of the Ministry of Health provided the necessary expertise to provide accurate health information to the public. Meanwhile, educationists, social media influencers, artists, fashion designers, beauticians, and other public figures such as sports personalities and entrepreneurs joined SLCD's mission to create awareness by reaching out to different niche groups of our target audience. We believe that this united front increased the receptiveness of the public.

We took several measures to approach the target group using social media, public webinars, and mass media. Altogether, 20 videos containing health messages by dermatologists and other medical specialists and motivational speeches by public figures and celebrities were released to the social media. Additionally, a theme video and a theme song were produced and released to social media.

<https://fb.watch/jp2M4AmhB4/>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aQg\\_YznFcNc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aQg_YznFcNc)

Twelve articles on newspapers and magazines, 11 television programmes, 02 radio programmes were done. In addition, stickers containing the logo were pasted on three wheelers and public transport in Western province. Posters were displayed in patient waiting areas of government and private hospitals and practices. Information leaflets were sent electronically to employees of corporate sector, school children and university students and distributed to specific groups such as garment factory workers. While these are few highlights of the entire campaign carried out over many months, this strategy ensured that the message penetrated the target group island-wide, irrespective of gender, educational level or social class.

The success of the social media and mass media components opened up many new avenues to ensure the project's sustainability. The most significant is the permission to incorporate this health message in the new school curriculum, extended by the Ministry of Education. As education is compulsory in Sri Lanka until age 14, this endorsement guarantees that the spirit of our campaign will eventually reach every citizen in the country.

To our knowledge, no other professional organization has organized a public awareness campaign of this caliber and depth in Sri Lanka. We are proud to state that this public awareness campaign continued successfully despite the worst ever economic crises in the country. Launching and maintaining a project on the negative impacts of skin whitening was challenging due to the vast market demand, the power of the skin fairness industry and the supportive media. However, the project involved many spheres of influence and thus was well-publicized. Therefore, we were able to achieve our goal of empowering the community at risk of using skin whitening.

To our pride this project was selected to be among the top five projects in Asia in the "International Awards for Social Responsibility in Dermatology" held in partnership with ILDS, L'oreal and 25<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Dermatology 2023.

## Acknowledgement

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### **References**

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