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SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOCIAL ROLE OF PUBLIC HEALTH MIDWIVES IN SRI LANKA: A PILOT STUDY

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In Sri Lanka, Public Health Midwives (PHMs) provide basic family planning services, pre-pregnancy care, and domiciliary care and clinic care for pregnant women and children less than five years of age. Currently, there are approximately 5000 PHMs in service in the country. Each PHM is responsible for a particular area consisting of a population ranging from 2000-4000. Midwives have to do the initial appointments with pregnant women, manage clinics and postnatal care in the home.

The midwife is the closest health care person that the community encounters. Any woman who needs the service of a midwife can approach her. Therefore, once the initial contact is made with the midwife, any person can seek necessary health care information from her. The PHM is a member of the community and her service is immensely valued particularly by people living in rural setups.

The overall objective of this study was to discuss and highlight the role of PHMs as a primary health worker and also to understand the social impact of midwifery on the community. Hence, it sought to understand how PHMs try to play her role as a primary health worker while dealing with other issues that they may face in the community.

The research methodology for the study was based on qualitative data collection. In-depth interviews with PHMs were conducted. The interviews addressed personal experiences of five PHMs in their own words. In addition, the study incorporated observations of home visits with those PHMs working in five divisions that comprised both rural and suburban set ups.

Although PHMs were not trained for different tasks, they are seemingly capable of providing care and also advising on particular issues at the community level. PHMs have rendered some services even though such activities are not directly related to their work as a PHM. For example, taking part in various community meetings and public functions, advising young boys on habits like smoking etc.

In a society like Sri Lanka where hierarchy is a key aspect of health culture, PHMs play a vital role in creating access to health information and services by building trust with the communities. Hence, it is apparent that the work of PHMs has had an overall positive effect on the community.