

PREVALENCE OF ECTOPARASITIC INFESTATIONS IN PATIENTS IN A MENTAL HOSPITAL

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Ectoparasitic infestations such as pediculosis and scabies are common among people in refugee camps, orphanages and in institutions such as mental hospitals and schools. These parasites, in addition to causing ill health may also act as vectors of diseases. The extent of ectoparasitic infestations in Sri Lanka has not been addressed often. This study was therefore, undertaken to assess the prevalence of ectoparasitic infestations in a mental hospital.

The study was conducted in the mental hospital in Angoda. The sample consisted of 10% of the total population of inward patients at the mental hospital, Angoda. Samples were stratified by duration of stay at the hospital and by the ward. By doing this a representative sample was selected on different ward conditions, sex of the patient and time spent in the hospital. The subjects were examined by the authors for the presence of lice on the head, body and pubic areas. Evidence of scabies was recorded. Samples of lice were collected for morphological studies and for molecular studies, to confirm the species identification. Scabies was diagnosed clinically and scrapings were taken from the lesions to identify the scabies mite.

One hundred and four patients, 60 males and 44 females, were examined during the study. Of the males 27(45%) had body lice with nits on the clothes. None of the females had body lice or nits on clothes. The adult body lice were pale coloured and larger than the head lice. The average size of the adult louse was 3.5 x 1.5 mm. The nits were found mainly on clothing and rarely on body hair.

Head lice were detected in all the females but none of the males had any. The presence of head lice did not differ with long and short hair or the duration of stay in the hospital. Clinical scabies was diagnosed only in 2 patients (prevalence 1.9 %).

This is the first report on the presence of body lice among humans in Sri Lanka. However, further studies need to be done to determine whether these body lice are a separate species or is the same as the existing head lice showing adaptations to a different site.