

Sexual and reproductive health education in schools



The taboo surrounding sexual and reproductive health needs to be broken and discussed more openly in societies.

Sharan Ram, a Masters in Public Health student at Fiji National University's (FNU), College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS) believes school-based sexual and reproductive health education is an important and inclusive way to help adolescents recognise and avert risks.

He says apart from improving reproductive health, such greater awareness will provide the practical knowledge and skills needed to reduce adolescent's vulnerability to reproductive health problems. Ram has conducted a study entitled "Perceptions of Students, Teachers and Parents concerning the delivery of Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) Education in secondary schools in Fiji."

This is the first study in Fiji which is aimed at gathering opinion from students, teachers and parents about the delivery of sex education in mainstream public secondary schools.

Eight schools located in the Central division (Lami, Suva and Nausori) were chosen for the study. The study was conducted on a voluntarily basis covering family life education teachers, parents with high-school attending children and Year 9 – 13 students.

"If sex education is not provided than young adolescents can end up indulging in behavior that is detrimental to them – they can engage in unsafe sexual practices which could lead to problems such as unwanted teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STIs)," said Ram.

The research indicated that in the home setting, SRH education was considered a taboo topic with parents feeling apprehensive, embarrassed, and ill-prepared to discuss this issue. Discussions were limited to avoidance of courtship and pre-marital sex.

"Proposing to address adolescent reproductive health openly in Fiji is viewed as sensitive and potentially controversial," said Ram.

"Across all groups, all parents were in favor of provision of SRH education in schools and said that it was crucial to have sex education in schools."

"Parents mentioned that issues around SRH were not discussed openly in majority of the homes as it is still considered a taboo, thus they felt school was a good avenue to teach young people SRH."

According to the findings of the survey, sexual and reproductive health education although is part of the curriculum in secondary schools, in some instances does not receive much emphasis as it should.

"When I started conducting the study I found that it is not offered in a mandatory way. The schools do have it in their timetable but that does not necessarily mean that

they are having the class. These dedicated classes are being forfeited and used for activities like religious programs or other celebrations."

Ram noted that the implementation of SRH education is not mandatory in mainstream public secondary schools in Fiji and suffer vague implementation in schools which attempt to do so.

"SRH classes feature once a week in the timetable of the students of all levels (Year 9 – 13) and the duration of the session ranges from 40-60 minutes. In few schools, it is offered in alternative weeks with SRH class in one week and Careers class in the following week."

"In some schools it is offered to Year 9 students only. In schools where SRH classes are hosted once a week at all levels, implementation depends on the teacher's availability and other school activities."

Ram said although Fiji's SRH education is compressive on the paper, its implementation isn't as effective on the ground.

He said topics discussed during the SRH class were limited and primarily focused on peer pressure, drugs and alcohol abuse.

"Fiji has a rights based approach which means the teachers need to teach every aspect of SRH including reproductive systems, conception, contraception and gender diversity (LGBT issues) at an appropriate age. However, due to certain factors teachers are held back from discussing these topics."

"Students informed me that they wanted more information on these topics including on ways to handle relationships, depression and suicide," said Ram.

"They wanted sex education classes, particularly for sensitive topics such as human sexual anatomy, reproduction and contraception to be conducted separately for males and females."

Recommendations

First and foremost, Ram believes SRH education should be made mandatory and its implementation assisted with level-specific guidebooks and other relevant aids.

"There is currently only one guide book for SRH for levels Year 11 – 13. Although teachers have a syllabus from the Ministry of Education (MOE), they did not develop a thorough Scheme of Work which outlined in a detailed manner the concepts that teachers need to plan and discuss with the students."

"A generalized guide book and no thorough Scheme of Work could be the reason for this haphazard implementation. Lack of training, absence of monitoring and detailed schemes of work or level-specific guidebooks leaves teachers to make their own individual judgement on what to teach."

A year-level-specific guidebook will assist teachers to make thorough lesson plans and deliver them accordingly.

Another important recommendation by Ram is for teacher training institutes to incorporate family life education in their courses.

"In Fiji, there is no professional training available for teachers to undertake to be able to teach this subject. Therefore, any teacher can be appointed by the school administration to teach the subject and in most cases the teachers do not have the liberty to refuse."

"This makes the teachers to just pick and teach what they like because they do not have the right skill set for this particular component of teaching."

Ram has suggested that MoE conduct workshops and refresher trainings for family life education teachers.

The FNU student presented his study findings during a two-day Pacific Island Health Research Symposium organised by CMHNS last month. Ram scooped the best presentation award at the event.