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Our dedicated data collection team

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Northern Province Covid-19 Hotline Service with the active involvement of Sri-Lankan AF team

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In Northern Province, hotline service was first introduced for in March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. An emergency hotline was established after receiving information about a pastor infected with COVID-19 conducting prayer in a Church at Jaffna. This hotline service is a collaborative work of health ministry Northern province, Department of community and family medicine Jaffna and the AF research team Sri Lanka. This collaborative work



helped to establish an excellent working relationship between the AF team and the other two key stake holders (health ministry Northern province, Department of community and family medicine Jaffna)

In the initial investigations, 14 out of 312 individuals who attended the prayer service were only identified immediately.

Hence an emergency telephone number was introduced by Northern province health department

and requested public to provide information about the attendees. Public response was good and within 48 hours, 312 attendees of the event were identified and necessary steps were taken to prevent the disaster, and the Jaffna district escaped from a serious calamity. Following the success of this initial step, Northern Province Covid-19 steering committee realized the need for a continuous 24-hour hotline service.

In the meeting conducted on 28th March 2020 by the committee decided to use the emergency telephone service to alleviate public panic and anxiety, to fulfill people's basic needs during curfew time, and to educate and inform the public about Covid-19. As a result the hotline service.

Therefore, within half an hour, 24 × 7 hotline service was started for Northern province people to get advice and information, as well as to file any complaints during the abnormal situation caused by Covid-19 infection.

Telephone numbers 021 221 7982, 021 222 6666 were introduced as emergency hotline service numbers for the mentioned purposes. Efficiency of this service was greatly enhanced under leadership of a consultant family physician and consultant community physician. The hotlines were operated by **three data collectors from global AF project Sri Lanka**, two demonstrators from department of community and family medicine. A doctor from Northern province, Sri Lanka coordinated the hotline.



This emergency hotline service helped not only Northern province people but also people from whole Sri Lanka to sort out their problems and grievances. Importantly to those hospital clinic patients who could not attend their clinics due to curfew and disruption of transport between districts. These patients called the

hotline number and expressed their problems and immediately these patients have been facilitated to contact their respective hospital clinics. In some circumstances, they were directed to consultant family physician to get further advice. Hence, they could clarify their doubts and problems as well as they could collect their clinic medicines at their doorstep. During this difficult period, some pharmacies were ready to distribute medicines at the doorsteps of the patients. The details of the pharmacies were collected and organized area wise. Therefore, to those patients who contacted via the hotline for medications, got their medicines delivered to their homes.

When people experienced symptoms such as fever, throat pain, difficulty in breathing similar to Corona symptoms, people became anxious and panicked and called to the hotline. Immediately necessary advices were given. Patients who have other diseases also contacted the hotline and guidance was given.

During the curfew time, patients had problems to get emergency ambulance service for their medical emergencies. So in addition to 1990 emergency ambulance service, if a patient called to hot line for emergency ambulance service nearest hospital ambulance to that particular patient had been sent to them.



Guidance and advice were given to the people who came to Northern province from other provinces for various purposes and stranded in Northern province due to curfew. Also some people illegally trespass into Northern province from other parts of the country

during the curfew time.

In these incidents, residents of the area called hotline and gave information regarding the new comers and necessary actions were taken. Interestingly some illegal trespassers called hotline by themselves and revealed their details and necessary action taken by the health department of Northern province.

People addicted to harmful drugs, addicted to alcohol, psychologically affected, and had suicidal tendency called to the hotline and necessary advice given by professionals. In addition to this, people who lost their livelihood and jobs due to Covid-19 contacted the hotline and necessary help was given with the help of Non-Governmental Organizations.

A specific incident could be mentioned among thousands of phone calls received to the hotline. A person called to the hotline when he was attempting suicide, hotline communicator continuously spoke with the person more than half an hour to buy time and in the meantime Public Health Inspector went to that person's house during the curfew time and could save that person's life.

Actually it was a challenge to coordinate and organize various type of services through the hotline but lot of people worked hard to overcome this challenge and succeeded. This hotline was actually initiated for Northern province but people living outside Northern province also contacted and got the necessary guidance and advice.

The reason of the success of this hotline service was good teamwork and the purpose of the each and every team member was to fulfill the people's needs and create an awareness of Covid-19 among the general public. Team members worked day and night to achieve these targets.

Fifteen people were called randomly from the recorded telephone numbers list who had previously called the hotline for feedback, and all mentioned that they were fully satisfied with this service. This hotline service is one of the reasons that Northern province is less affected by the Corona virus.

Now this hotline service functions with the help of "Neyam" organization and extended its service in the field of counseling and very continuing its service successfully.

An experience of adventurous field visit for data collection



*Ms.S.Piranavy
Data collecting assistant*

This is about an adventurous experience we encountered during one of our field visits. There is always a coordinator working for us before our team begins a data collection process in an area or village. She is the one who will establish a consistent program of work in that particular area or village for us after consulting with the Grama Niladharis and Pradeshiya Sabha officers, who are the in charges of that area in order to ensure that it is a safe place for us to work and does not cause us any inconvenience.

As always our coordinator went to the area we intended to collect data a week ahead of schedule and checked with the public health inspector to make sure there were no Corona Virus infections or other health issues that could affect us. He also consulted with the Grama Niladhari to verify and confirm the physical and sociological conditions of the region, ensuring that the area was safe to conduct the data collection as scheduled. So we got ready to visit to that area under the guidance of our coordinator.

As usual, I went to that village with my group in the morning to start our work. However, there was a deathly silence in the village and which was pretty strange. We had been looking forward to beginning the work and had been put in a perplexing mood, not just because of the quiet situation, but also because the majority of the participants in the houses we planned to visit had left the village. There was no one seen even to get to know about the situation. In such a situation, we contacted the Grama Niladhari in response to a request made from one of us to call the Grama Niladhari in order to calm down the restless mood in our group. After that only, we learnt about the village's unpredictable and dangerous situation. We learnt that a double murder occurred the night before we arrived, resulting from a conflict between two people, and that the killers are hidden in the village. Everyone in the group was petrified with shock as soon as we heard that terrific incident.

Everyone's heart was loaded with fear of death and then, we gathered our strength and called the coordinator to notify him about the seriousness of the situation. Then, as instructed by the coordinator, we got ready to leave the place immediately, only then we found out that the vehicle that had picked us up was parked far away from where we were standing. We didn't have time to wait for the vehicle to arrive at the location where we were standing, so we began walking away from that place and told the driver to follow us to the direction where we were walking. Despite our hearts' fear of death, we managed to reach the vehicle after much struggle and with each other's support. As the vehicle slowly left the village, the fear also subsided. We were overjoyed when the vehicle arrived at the medical faculty, and the fear in everyone's hearts vanished as we triumphed over the unusual incident.

However, our enthusiasm to complete the data collection process in that village, as well as the motivation from the coordinator led us back there. But this time arrangement in regards to our safety was increased threefold time than before by our coordinator and other research administrators. In addition, psychological training on how the villagers' mood is currently, how we can approach and handle them, and self-defense training were given. Following that, we again visited to that village with the courage provided by our management, despite a little fear in the back of our minds.

We met all of the participants we needed to meet in the best possible way, learnt about their current moods, spoke to them in a friendly manner, reassured their fears, completed our work on time, and happily returned back to the university after successful completion of our data collection process. Regardless of what is written in this article, the worries and anxieties that plagued at that moment are definitely indescribable in words. Each journey of our research team is filled with new experiences, exciting events, and lifestyles we've never seen before, as if the life we thought we knew was not really life. We are proud to be a part of this journey, and we thank to God for it. I conclude it, by hoping that the completion of this journey will one day help us to the next stages of my life, and let us continue this journey with joy.



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Data collection process in Jaffna



Conducting training session for data collectors



Visiting areas to collect data



Collecting data from participants



Issues faced by the data collectors during the process



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