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A study on the prevalence of and correlation between depression, cognitive impairment, and disability among elderly clinic attendees

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Introduction The elderly population is increasing worldwide, and Sri Lanka is not an exception. Due to the aging-related physical and physiological changes, the elderly are vulnerable not only to physical illnesses, but also to psychological problems and disability.

Objectives The aim of this study was to assess the prevalence of depression, cognitive impairment and disability among the elderly patients attending the medical clinics, and identify the correlation among these entities.

Methodology An institution-based, cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out at the medical clinics, Teaching Hospital, Jaffna. Systematic sampling technique was used to recruit 122 adults aged 60 and above who are attending the clinics between November, 2020 to March, 2021. An interviewer-administering method was used to collect the data by using 15-item Geriatric Depression Scale, Montreal Cognitive Assessment, 12-item World Health Organization Disability Assessment Schedule 2.0, and a sociodemographic section. Pearson's correlation was performed using SPSS 25 software.

The study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of Faculty of Medicine, Jaffna.

Results More than 45% of the study participants had two or more illnesses for which they attended the medical clinics. All the study participants had at least one of the three entities we assessed, with depression being prevalent in 44.3% (95% CI, 35.5-53.1), cognitive impairment in 80.3% (95% CI, 73.2-87.4), and disability in 95.9% (95% CI, 92.4-99.4). The number of medical conditions significantly correlated with the presence of the entities we assessed ($p=0.008$). The level of depression showed significant positive correlation with both cognitive impairment ($p=0.010$) and disability ($p<0.001$).

Conclusions The risk of developing psychological problems and disability in the elderly increases with the number of medical illnesses. Among them, those with depression are more likely to be suffering from cognitive impairment and/or disability.