**KIDNEY DISEASE TAKES ITS TOLL ON PEOPLE IN PADAVIYA**

By Kelum Bandara

Five years ago, P. Sumathipala, 55, of Padavaya in the Anuradhapura district, began feeling faint after merely two hours of tilling in his field. These bouts of dizziness were soon accompanied by joint pains. The illness persisted for some time, and he was worried about his declining health condition. He went for a health check-up, and was diagnosed with renal failure.

"Luckily, my illness was diagnosed at an early stage. For the last five years, I am under medication. I cannot engage in hard hours as a farmer any more. I feel tired and faintish when I try to do it. Today, I only work for a few hours at a maximum. I have to spend quite a lot of money for my regular medication," he said, while he balanced a canal of fresh milk on his hip.

Sucathapala is only one patient among a large number of people suffering from the Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) of unknown etiology in the agricultural areas of the dry zone.

The CKD, a killer disease caused by toxic elements entering the food chain, continues to take its toll on the lives of people, particularly in the Padavaya and Mahaa Wilachchilage hospital areas in the Anuradhapura district. Initially, it was farmers: between 40 and 50 who went into the vulnerable group. However, data suggests the deadly disease has now reached epic proportions even affecting those in the younger age groups.

Given the magnitude of the problem, in order to understand the root causes of the spread of this epidemic disease, Dr. Chinthaka Wijewardena, the Director Medical Officer (DMO) of Mahaa Wilachchilage Hospital, has been actively involved in research and experiments in the agricultural areas of the North Central Province since 2009. He has been studying the disease and its potential social implications.

"Kidneys through medication and precautions. If the disease is managed by the time of diagnosis, it will be serious. Then, patients have to be subjected to dialysis treatment which is costly and painful for patients," he added.

Hard water (that has a high mineral content) and pollution of soil due to heavy metal toxicity caused by arsenic and cadmium metals is one of the main reasons for chronic renal failure.

Most patients are advised to avoid being overburdened by work. In the area such as Nilwara, Weewa, and Mahawilachchige, Weewa, Water taken from dug wells is suspected of being waterborne.
Can agro-chemicals be discarded?

Despite health risks involved, it has been difficult to discourage farmers from using chemical fertilisers, weed-killers and pesticides. For a bumper harvest, agro-chemicals have become an important input and farmers assume it is difficult to work without using them. Increased output of agricultural products with low inputs to meet the food requirement of a growing population.

In Paldarivo, too, a group of farmers have cultivated traditional practices which do not use any chemical fertilisers. However, such varieties can yield low harvests.

Therefore, whether farmers can switch to the long run is questionable. The authorities are concerned with the challenge of devising a mechanism that serves the two-fold purpose—abandonment of agro-chemicals and sustainability of food security.

Fit by Samantha Perera

"If we do not take precautions when sprayed with pesticides or medicines, we put our health and our environment at risk," a farmer said.

Not all farmers are aware of the potential dangers associated with the use of agro-chemicals. Some farmers, who claim they have been using them for years, say they have not experienced any negative effects. However, experts argue that long-term exposure to these chemicals can lead to serious health problems.

According to a report by the World Health Organisation (WHO), exposure to agro-chemicals can lead to respiratory problems, skin infections, and even cancer. The report also highlights the impact of these chemicals on the environment, stating that they can contaminate water sources and harm wildlife.

The use of agro-chemicals is particularly alarming in Paldarivo, where farmers rely heavily on them for their crops. However, with the increasing awareness about the dangers of these chemicals, there is a growing movement towards the adoption of traditional farming methods.

"I prefer traditional farming methods because they are sustainable and do not harm the environment," said one of the farmers.

Experts agree that traditional farming methods, such as crop rotation and natural pest control, are more effective and environmentally friendly. They also argue that these methods can lead to better soil quality and higher crop yields.

"Traditional farming methods are not only good for the environment but also for the health of our farmers," said another expert.

As the awareness about the dangers of agro-chemicals continues to grow, there is hope that farmers in Paldarivo and beyond will be encouraged to adopt sustainable practices.

"We need to educate farmers about the dangers of agro-chemicals and encourage them to adopt sustainable farming methods," said a local government official.