

Mouth Cancer – Is your Dental Practice playing its part?

Educational aims:

To provide members with an understanding of the importance of oral cancer screening and the role they can play in ensuring that their practice meets its obligations to patients.

CPD outcomes:

To gain a better understanding of the importance of oral cancer screening;
To recognise the need to raise awareness of oral cancer;
To understand what steps can be taken within a dental practice to ensure early intervention for patients.

So whose responsibility is it to prevent the next case of oral cancer? The answer is YOURS! With a 60% escalation in oral cancer across the UK since the 1970's and the raised public awareness that comes with it, patients are expecting their dentists and teams to thoroughly screen for the disease and many do not have an issue with taking legal proceedings if something is missed.




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The Issue

The problem is that not only are the cases of oral cancer rising but more importantly it is not being detected early enough. Early detection is key to saving lives.

"A major problem is that more than half of all oral cancer cases have already metastasised to regional or distant structures at the time of detection which decreases the 5 year survival rate to less than 50% for tongue and floor of mouth cancers" (BDA, 2011).

Oral cancer, skin melanoma and cervical cancer cause about the same number of deaths each year, but oral cancer still has a worse ratio of deaths to cases. Why are we still seeing this trend?

A recent research article in the British Dental Journal highlighted that despite being aware of their professional duty of care to screen for oral cancer, clinicians said that time constraints and a lack of experience, knowledge and confidence are barriers to screening and talking to patients about 'cancer'. The study also reflected on the point that the whole dental team is often not trained to support clinicians in the early detection of oral cancer in general practice as access to CPD, time and funding are also standing in the way.

Outside of the dental world, there is no Government initiative to tackle oral cancer. Youngsters in secondary schools are not being educated about the risk factors as they start to experiment with lifestyle choices that increase their risk of developing the disease. This lack of education is worrying as more and more young people are dying from oral cancer. Only when public awareness is boosted will symptoms for oral cancer begin to present earlier in general practice.

The 'Take-Home' message.

Within CQC Outcomes 1 and 4, inspectors are now looking for evidence that your team 'cares' about safeguarding your patients against oral cancer. Not only does an oral cancer management system in your practice safeguard your patients' oral and systemic health, it also assists in meeting your professional obligation to do so. The take-home message is definitely "Screen, learn, talk and educate"

What can you do in your dental practice?

A huge difference can be made in raising oral cancer awareness and detecting it earlier in general dental practice by:-

- 1 Developing an oral cancer management strategy for the early detection of oral cancer
www.mouthcancerfoundation.org/mcsas/about-mcsas
- 2 Training the whole team in verifiable oral cancer management CPD – now a GDC recommended/core CPD topic for clinicians
www.pmp-consulting.co.uk/services-oral-cancer-cpd.html
- 3 Clarifying each team member's role and responsibilities within the practice's early detection system.
- 4 'Triaging' new patients for oral cancer before placing them on a waiting list.
- 5 Ensuring that every patient is screened opportunistically and in line with medico-legal guidance from the BDA.
- 6 Establishing a referral pathway with a specialist department with a 'fast track' system in place.
- 7 Using a custom-made format for documenting screenings systematically.
- 8 Following NICE guidelines for the referral of oral cancer.
- 9 Ensuring that all staff are knowledgeable and sensitive in speaking to patients during screenings, particularly if a referral is made.
- 10 Educating patients about oral cancer and self-screening e.g. advice leaflets, posters, verbal communication.
- 11 Offering free screening days and supporting national campaigns
www.mouthcancer.org
- 12 Contacting your local media about assisting in the promotion of an oral cancer event you might be organising.

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