Oral Cancer; An Evaluation of Knowledge and Awareness Between Undergraduate Dental Students, Dentists and The General Public.

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Introduction:

- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) seven hundred people died in 2011 from malignant neoplasms of the lip, oral cavity and pharynx (C00-C14). These figures are in contrast to those reported for cervical cancer, which has an effective public health awareness program. For the same period, the ABS reported only two hundred and twenty nine deaths as a result of cervical cancer (C53). As with most cancers, early detection can often improve the long-term prognosis and quality of life.
- The aim of this study was to evaluate the current level of oral cancer knowledge amongst dental personnel (Undergraduate students and dentists), and also to evaluate the level of oral cancer awareness held by members of the general public.
- Further, the objectives of this study was to determine if a relationship existed between age, gender and socioeconomic status of patients and the level of their oral cancer awareness.
- Additionally the study also looked for the first time at the difference in ability to diagnose and detect oral cancer amongst undergraduate students and dentists.

Materials and Methods:

- Two self-report questionnaires were devised based upon previous research studies conducted by Brazik et al. (2012)³ and Villa et al. (2011)⁴.
- The first questionnaire was distributed amongst patients attended the Griffith University Dental Clinic and used simple terms.
- The Second questionnaire was distributed amongst dental personnel (students and general dentists) in the same clinic, and contained medically specific terminology.

Results:

- Overall 150 patients and 100 dental personnel’s consented to participate in the study over the six months study period.
- There was an acceptable level of general awareness amongst most patients about some risk factors of oral cancer.
- One third of the participants were not aware of signs and symptoms or the risk factors related to oral cancer.
- The majority (n=93, 93.0%) of dental personnel stated that they routinely screened for oral cancers. It was unfortunate that eighty-one percent of them stated that they did not inform their patients that they were conducting an oral cancer screen.
- Only three percent of participants felt they were very well informed, while one quarter of participants felt poorly informed about the clinical appearance of oral cancer lesions. Interestingly, almost half the participants indicated that hairy leukoplakia was a mucosal change they would associate with oral cancer.
- Overall, general dental practitioners were found to possess a statistically significant level of knowledge about oral cancer, compared to fourth and fifth year undergraduate dental students. Of interest is that fourth year students possessed more oral cancer knowledge when compared to fifth year students.
- Answers to open ended questions in dental personnel’s questionnaire regards risk factors, common areas and signs and symptoms of oral cancer are illustrated in figures 1, 2 & 3.

Conclusions:

1) Age and sex of patients are not factors affecting the level of oral cancer awareness held by the patients.
2) Level of experience is an important factor affecting the level of oral cancer identification.
3) Awareness about the importance of early detection of oral cancer lesions and resulting long-term prognosis was very high between both the dental patients and dental personnel.
4) Awareness about smoking as a risk factor of oral cancer is much higher amongst dental patients and dental personnel compared to their knowledge about alcohol, age and HPV as risk factors for oral cancer.
5) Dental personnel need to be educated about erythroplakia being a risk factor for oral cancer as well as the common sites for oral cancer lesions.
6) More communication is recommended between dentists and patients about oral cancer screening.

References: