Oral Cancer Awareness and Continuing Education

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Continuing education is very important in all areas of dentistry, but no area more so than oral cancer. April is oral cancer awareness month, making now a great time to explore the topic. We spoke with Sherri M. Lukes, FAADH, MS, RDH, who has been a dental hygienist for 42 years and spent most of her career in academia, teaching and conducting research. She taught oral pathology at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale — the only baccalaureate dental hygiene program in the state — for 25 years and brings a wealth of knowledge on the topic.

Q: Should dental professionals seek routine continuing education opportunities in both oral pathology in general and, more specifically, oral cancer?

A: There is so much to keep up with in dentistry, and quite frankly, it is easy to forget to seek these continuing education opportunities. The many lesions we study in our dental training often end up in the recesses of our minds as we concentrate on routine clinical procedures in everyday practice. We all need refresher courses to stay up to date on pathologies that could be detected in the assessment phase of treatment. Because there are new discoveries all the time in the area of oral cancer, it's critical for us to regularly update our knowledge bases.

Q: What are some reasons oral cancer awareness should receive a greater emphasis within the dental community and public health sectors?

A: Most oral cancers are squamous cell carcinomas, and (unfortunately) we continue to identify oral cancers too late in the course of the disease for good disease management and long-term prognosis.

Current statistics reveal that approximately 54,000 Americans will be diagnosed with oral or oropharyngeal cancer this year, and only approximately 57% of those diagnosed will be alive in five years. This number has not improved significantly in decades. The improvement we have seen is primarily because of the increase in oropharyngeal cancers, which are more responsive to treatment modalities than cancers of the oral cavity.



Oral and oropharyngeal cancers are actually two different disease entities with different etiologies, molecular profiles, clinical appearances, and treatment responses and outcomes. Squamous cell carcinoma of the oral cavity (OCSCC), though multifactorial, is still considered to result primarily from tobacco use, with consistent alcohol consumption producing a synergistic effect. It can appear clinically as multiple lesion types to be identified during oral examination. Squamous cell carcinoma of the oropharynx (OPSCC) is considered to be the result of infection by one of the high-risk strains of human papillomavirus (HPV), producing a malignancy in the oropharynx region after a period of latency. OPSCC is associated with parameters of sexual behavior, is most often not visible during oral examination, and is more commonly identified after metastasizing to regional lymph nodes. OPSCC tends to respond better to radiation and chemotherapy than do HPV-negative tumors of the oral cavity. 1, 2, 3

Early detection, however, is critical in both diseases, placing the dental team on the front lines of early diagnosis. During the assessment phase of treatment, the dental hygienist or dentist should conduct a thorough intra/extraoral exam, noting any variations from normal and following up with recommendations for treatment and/or resolution of lesions. The earlier a lesion is identified and diagnosed as malignant, the earlier it can be graded and staged (per the TNM system for staging and grading of tumors), leading to better treatment outcomes and improved long-term prognosis.4

Q: What resources do you recommend for reviewing oral cancer screening techniques?

A: There are many resources available to dental professionals for honing our detection skills. For example, we can find many videos on YouTube for easy viewing. Professional websites provide videos as well as written resources for downloading free of charge, without requiring paid membership.

It is also important that we teach our patients how to do self-exams and know how to assist them in finding resources, and I encourage professionals to verify the educational entity providing the education to ensure the information's accuracy.

Some of my favorite resources include:

- The Oral Cancer Foundation
- Make Sense Campaign
- "How to Check Patients for Oral Cancer" (ADA oral cancer screening technique video)
- "Washington AGD and AGD Foundation on How to Perform an Oral Cancer Screening" video
- "A Comprehensive Review of a Visual and Tactile Oral Cancer Screening" (The Oral Cancer Foundation video)
- Check Your Mouth self-detection

I recommend continuing oral cancer education not just as a dental professional, but also because of personal experience. My brother-in-law is a four-time head/neck cancer survivor. He was first diagnosed in 1991 with a small nodule in his tongue — squamous cell carcinoma. Due to his vigilance in receiving regular oral cancer screenings during dental visits and an excellent team at his dentist's office, he has lived through multiple surgeries, radiation, and chemotherapy — and is still alive 32 years later. I want to educate other professionals about the importance of thorough oral cancer screenings to identify oral cancers earlier in their progression and boost our long-term prognosis statistics. Together, we can beat the odds.

We want to thank Sherri Lukes for answering our questions, and we invite you to evaluate our wide range of products designed to protect clinicians, patients, and the practice during dental procedures. For more information, visit palmerohealth.com, call 800-344-6424 or email customerservice@palmerohealth.com.

References

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⁴Int J Environ Res Public Health 2020; 17:9160.

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Speaker, author, and vulnerable populations advocate, Sherri Lukes has been a dental hygienist for 42 years, holding advanced degrees in education. She is associate professor emerita, Southern Illinois University, where she taught general and oral pathology, public health, and multicultural dental hygiene. Her research focus was oral pathology and migrant farmworker oral health, resulting in multiple peer reviewed publications. Sherri enjoys integrating her years of experience into CE courses to empower dental professionals in the process of care. She is an approved speaker of and holds a pathology fellowship in the American Academy of Dental Hygiene, is a past president of the Illinois Dental Hygienists' Association, and a member of the American Academy of Oral Medicine. Community service includes biannual trips to central/southern Mexico, delivering preventive care in an orphanage and remote villages. Honors include Community Service, Research, and Teacher of the Year awards at SIU, Illinois Department of Public Health Oral Health Champion, and the Sunstar/RDH Award of Distinction.

