



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Oral cancer prevention: the dentist's attitude, the key factor.

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Cancer is one of the leading causes of mortality worldwide. In 2008, there were more than 12 million new cases and 7 million deaths from cancer reported. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that around 84 million people will die from the disease between 2005 and 2015. Oral cancer is among the 10 most common cancers in men in the world with an incidence of 5.5 per 100,000 inhabitants. In the case of women, the incidence decreases by half¹. It is estimated that 263,000 new cases are diagnosed each year. Its mortality rate is higher than other types of cancer most commonly known by the population, e.g. uterine cervical, skin, and thyroid². Therefore, oral cancer represents a major public health problem not only at the global level, but also at the national level. It not only generates a significant mortality, but also causes important aesthetic, functional, emotional and economic consequences for the patients who suffer from it.

We must consider the major factors related to this disease. It is known that this type of cancer mainly affects men, who are older than 45 and present chronic exposure to tobacco and alcohol (lifestyles). We must also point out that, unfortunately, the Chilean population presents one of the highest rates of smoking and alcohol consumption worldwide.

It is important to ask ourselves what dentists' attitude towards this disease currently is, no matter the specialty. Do we talk with our patients about the risk factors and prevention for oral cancer? How do we perform a systematic examination of the oral cavity, including neck palpation?

We must point out that, from among health professionals, the dentist has a fundamental and key role in educating patients on early detection of oral cancer³. This key role is based on performing the preventive oral cancer examination on all patients. A key point is the level of

knowledge about this disease. Studies indicate that those dentists who attended an annual training on oral cancer tended to have a higher level of knowledge about it, a positive attitude about their preparation and the tendency to perform preventive oral cancer examinations on all patients³.

Unfortunately, patients with oral cancer believe that, for an early consultation, it is necessary to know about the existence of this disease, but they feel that there is a great lack of knowledge regarding this type of cancer compared to others. The little awareness about this disease is an important factor that determines a late diagnosis⁴.

The "Stick out your tongue! Prevent oral cancer" (Saca la lengua. Previene el cancer oral) campaign aims to create awareness in the population, considering smoking and alcohol consumption as the main risk factors for developing oral cancer. It also encourages oral self-examination, so that people learn how to recognize suspicious lesions to allow for the early diagnosis and improve the prognosis of this disease. It also motivates the population to have a timely visit to the dentist, the trained professional for guidance on the diagnosis. Currently, together with more than 300 dental student volunteers, we have executed more than 100 activities in situ where more than 600 preventive examinations for oral cancer have been carried out, more than 1,500 people have learned to conduct their own oral self-examination, over 150,000 pamphlets and educational posters have been delivered in health centers in the region and the country.

We invite all the dentists to be part of this campaign and to promote healthy lifestyles. Also, we motivate them to participate in refresher courses in oral pathology. We encourage complete examination of the oral cavity (including palpation of the neck) under the slogan "**a few minutes of preventive oral cancer examination can save lives**". This exam must be performed carefully, with



adequate lighting and giving special attention to high risk locations (edge of tongue and floor of the mouth). Studies indicate that the oral exam for early diagnosis of oral cancer is a valuable initiative in addition to the primary prevention efforts to reduce smoking and alcohol consumption. Based on the results, the oral examination for the detection of precancerous lesions would have the potential to prevent at least 37,000 deaths from oral cancer in the world each year⁵.

Early detection and reducing risk factors are the best way to reduce the morbidity and mortality of oral cancer. For this reason, we must unite our efforts (Universities, College of Dentists and Ministry of Health) to make the prevention of oral cancer a public health policy.

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