Mouth cancer ignorance continues

A facial surgery research charity has announced its largest ever survey results that some dental practice staff are still not adequately informed about the signs of mouth cancer, thereby ‘delaying treatment and resulting in ‘invasive and disfiguring surgery for thousands.’

The telephone survey conducted by The Facial Surgery Research Foundation, (FSBF) Saving Faces, looked at responses from 444 dental practices in London.

Lack of knowledge on oral cancer was revealed to be the case, even when a patient rang a surgery with clear symptoms.

The survey showed that in 45 per cent of cases, patients with serious symptoms were not offered an appointment within one week.

In eight per cent of cases, patients were told they had to wait between three weeks and four months. In a further seven per cent, patients were told they could not be seen at all, because the surgery had met its NHS quota.

The survey revealed that the majority of calls were taken by receptionists who did not recognize the symptoms of mouth cancer, even though patients informed them they had suffered from tongue ulcers which had not healed for more than four weeks, despite self-medication with over the counter remedies.

Oral and maxilla-facial surgeon, Professor Iain Hutchinson, the CEO of Saving Faces, said: ‘Increased focus on the symptoms of mouth cancer has certainly improved awareness amongst dentists, but the first person a patient speaks to is usually a receptionist.

The study reveals these people often do not recognise even obviously risky cases.

We see thousands of patients that are only referred to us when their mouth cancer is at an advanced stage.

ProF Hutchinson added: ‘Much more needs to be done to train receptionists, because they are the daily base-line of the treatment team. The longer a patient has to wait for an appointment, the more difficult the condition is to treat.

The FSBF has been leading a campaign to increase public awareness of mouth cancer along with risk factors such as smoking.

The charity conducts clinical research to improve the treatment of cancer of the head and neck, facial injury and deformity and also runs tobacco and alcohol educational intervention programmes for more than 8,000 children.

In the United Kingdom alone, 4,700 people develop oral cancer every year and 1,700 people die from this specific type of cancer.

Mouth Cancer Action Week later this year is taking place in London, The event, on October 9, at Woburn centre as part of a multi-agency campaign, where parents were given a free dental pack for thousands.’

The BDHF urges dental practitioners to spot warning signs, screening patients for mouth cancer at every visit and discussing the issues and warning signs with patients.

But Derek Watson, CEO of the Dental Practitioners Association commented, ‘oral cancer is difficult to diagnose, particularly in the early stages, even for dentists. This was highlighted by the recent case of Dr Nalin Dhamecha who was advised by the GDC to retrain on recognising oral cancer, after he failed to recognise a lesion from which the patient later died. Urgent appointments are usually reserved by receptionists for patients in pain and most cancers are painless in the early stages. Receptionists could be asked to add ‘painless ulcers which are not healing’ to their list of emergency conditions, but expecting them to recognise mouth cancer from a telephone description is really disguised frustration at the time it takes to see a dentist. I think that reducing non-attendance rates and delay by patients in seeking advice – especially drinkers and smokers – and setting up fast-track referrals into secondary care, are higher priorities than blaming overworked receptionists.’

Switch to sterile

Pre-sterilised at no extra cost

Use straight from blister pack: Added convenience, save time and costs

Stainless steel brands: ColorimeX, FLEXfold, HedoReme & K-Flexoreamersse

Nickel-Titanium brands: ProTape Universal Rotary Files & PROFlig Rotary Files

Other accessories also available sterile. Contact us to find out more!