Editorial comment
It’s time to save lives

“Somebody has to suffer to make people listen and this woman is to be applauded.”

It is a telling confession when a mouth cancer sufferer diagnosed her own condition from surfing the web. Speaking at the Houses of Parliament last week, guest speaker Lia Mills recalled her shocking journey. Her sister died from breast cancer three weeks after the diagnosis – that was bad enough. Vigilant to the letter “T”, Lia had regular check-ups, but during each mammogram she had no idea that her own mouth was, as she put it, “eating me alive”. It all began with a ‘sore’ in her mouth that would not heal. Her first dentist told her she was unconsciously chewing her cheek and prescribed Bonjela. Her second dentist recommended replacing her old fillings. But still the sore continued. Extensive Internet research steered Lia towards the real problem – mouth cancer. After divulging her suspicions to her dentist (and this is the really shocking bit) he laughed, and said ‘no way’. Why did he laugh? Because her ‘profile’ did not match the ‘typical’ mouth cancer sufferer. By the time the mouth cancer was confirmed, it had spread to Lia’s lymph nodes and surgery began in haste. She had bone, skin and fat taken from her leg to rebuild her face, but after aggressive radiotherapy she can now eat, chew and swallow – things we all take for granted. Nevertheless, mouth cancer is no mouth cancer, Lia has a way with words and a powerful voice so strong you are compelled to sit up and listen.

This woman is a survivor and standing up in front of powerful people from the dentistry profession is part of her destiny. Somebody has to suffer to make other people listen and this woman is to be applauded. The support – from the top down – was there. So thank you Ann Keen, Rosie Cooper, Barry Cockcroft and Peter Ward for backing this campaign.

Dental Tribune reported just a month ago that mouth cancer causes more deaths per number of cases than breast cancer, cervical cancer or melanomas. The mortality rate of these cancers is just over 50 per cent because it is always detected too late. In 2005, there was approximately one death every three hours. Enough is enough – we need to raise awareness and we need to take action in whatever way we can.

Mouth Cancer Action Week ran from November 16th-November 22nd. Dental Tribune urges all of you from the profession to do what you can to get the word out there. Lia Mills was lucky – she lived to tell the tale. There are many other people who will die, because of lack of awareness of this condition. Whose life will you save this week?

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