Dental care professionals suitable for performing oral screenings

By Dental Tribune

MANCHESTER, UK: Researchers from the University of Manchester have found that oral hygiene therapists can perform screening for common dental diseases as well as general dentists. Their study compared the diagnostic test accuracy of hygiene therapists in screening for dental caries and periodontal disease in regularly attending asymptomatic adults.

The findings have important ramifications for service design in public-funded health systems as regularly attending adult patients in the UK are increasingly asymptomatically and often do not require treatment at their routine dental examinations. Thus, using GDPs to undertake the check-ups on regular low-risk patients represents a potentially unnecessary cost for state-funded systems.

Given recent regulatory changes in the UK, it is now theoretically possible to delegate a range of tasks to dental care professionals. According to the researchers, role substitution in primary dental care may be a promising option for reducing costs, re-allocating the GDP's time and increasing the capacity to care for those who do not currently access services. Throughout the UK, only about 50 per cent of the population attend the dentist. The other half is generally socio-economically disadvantaged and experiences the majority of dental diseases.

Ten dental practices across North West England took part in the study and 1,899 asymptomatic adult patients were screened. Visual screening by hygiene therapists was taken as the index test and the GDP acted as the reference standard. The primary outcomes measured were the sensitivity and specificity values for dental caries and periodontal disease.

The results of the study showed that the hygiene therapists performed comparably to the GDPs. Richard Macey, lead author of the study and research assistant at the dental school, told medicalnewstoday.com: “In particular, hygiene therapists were good at identifying those patients the GDP had confirmed were caries free and at identifying periodontal disease where the dentists confirmed its presence.”

Fiona Sandom, President of the British Association of Dental Therapists, welcomed the findings of the study. “Our association finds the results of this study encouraging and we view it as further evidence to support delegation within the dental team. The research confirms that dental hygienists and therapists have key parts to play in the future delivery of dental care within the UK.”

Bilions to suffer from untreated decay

By Dental Tribune

LONDON, UK: Despite worldwide efforts to improve oral health, a global study has found that 35 per cent of the world’s population currently suffer from untreated carious lesions in their permanent teeth. It also established that 623 million children worldwide have tooth decay that goes without dental care.

To make things worse, hundreds of millions of new cases are expected to add to the burden of dental decay annually owing to neglected treatment, according to the new paper by researchers from the UK, the US and Australia published online in the Journal of Dental Research.

Even developed countries are affected, with one in three people in the UK suffering the consequences of neglected treatment, along with one in five in the US, for example.

“The findings, which are part of the latest Global Burden of Disease study, involved a systematic review of all data on untreated dental decay, leading to a comprehensive report on rates of tooth decay for all countries and age groups and both sexes for 1990 and 2010,” stated Dr Nigel Carter, OBE, Chief Executive of the BDHF.

The team analysed 192 studies of 15 million children aged 1 to 14 years old, across 67 countries, and 186 studies of 3.2 million people aged 5 years or older, across 67 countries.

“We have seen a clear shift in the burden of tooth decay from children to adults. The current perception that low levels of decay in childhood will continue throughout life seems incorrect,” said lead author Prof Wagner Marones from the Queen Mary University of London.

“It is alarming to see prevention and treatment of tooth decay has been neglected at this level because if left untreated it can cause severe pain, mouth infection and it can negatively impact children’s growth.”

Marones explained that the study underscores the vital need to develop effective oral health promotion strategies.

“The fact that a preventable oral disease like tooth decay is the most prevalent of all diseases and injuries examined in our report is quite disturbing and should serve as a wake-up call to policymakers to increase their focus on the importance of dental health,” he continued. “Extending oral health promotion activities to the work environment is necessary to maintain good oral health to reduce the major biological, social and financial burden on individuals and healthcare systems.”

Tooth decay is the fourth most expensive chronic disease to treat, and studies have shown that if left untreated it can lead to poor productivity at work and absenteeism in adults and poor school attendance and performance in children.

Alarming increase in oral cancer rates

By Dental Tribune

RUGBY, UK: In marking World Cancer Day, the British Dental Health Foundation (BDHF) has highlighted the constantly increasing rates of oral cancer in the country. Latest statistics from Cancer Research UK showed that nearly 6,800 people are diagnosed with mouth cancer in the UK every year. This figure has increased by 50 per cent within the last ten years.

According to leading oral cancer campaigners, mouth cancer rates could be reduced by improving the public’s knowledge of the associated risk factors and possible symptoms.

World Cancer Day, an initiative of the Union for International Cancer Control, takes place every year on 4 February and aims to raise awareness about the disease and to promote action by governments and individuals all around the world. Under the tagline “Not be yond us”, this year’s World Cancer Day placed emphasis on cancer prevention, including following a healthy lifestyle and early detection.

In order to educate people about these risks, as well as the signs and symptoms of mouth cancer, the BDHF initiated Mouth Cancer Action Month, a month-long campaign that has been run every November since 2009.

“It is almost as though these messages were created with mouth cancer in mind, given the huge significance they can make to reducing the risk of the disease and catching it early,” stated Dr Nigel Carter, OBE, Chief Executive of the BDHF.

Lifestyle factors, such as tobacco use, excessive alcohol consumption, poor diet and human papillomavirus infection, contribute to an increased risk of developing mouth cancer.

According to Cancer Research UK, nine in ten cases of oral cancer are associated with these factors.

“We often find many cases are diagnosed at stage 4—the most advanced stage where time is of the essence in potentially saving a life. Without early detection, the five-year survival rate for mouth cancer is only 50 per cent. If it is caught early, survival rates over five years can dramatically improve to up to 90 per cent,” explained Carter. According to BDHF, more than 1,800 people in the UK lose their life to mouth cancer every year.

The BDHF recommends visiting the dentist and checking for possible mouth cancer symptoms regularly.

Carter emphasised: “We are asking everybody to be mouthaware by looking out for ulcers which do not heal within three weeks, red and white patches in the mouth and unusual lumps or swellings in the mouth are early warning signs of mouth cancer.”
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Study finds e-learning as good as traditional training for health professionals

By Dental Tribune

LONDON, UK: Electronic learning could enable millions more students to train as doctors and nurses worldwide, according to the latest research. A review commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) and carried out by Imperial College London researchers concluded that e-learning is likely to be as effective as traditional methods for training health professionals. These new findings support the approach to continuing education Dental Tribune International (DTI) has adopted with its free online education platform for dental professionals.

The Imperial team, led by Dr Josip Car, carried out a systematic review of the scientific literature to evaluate the effectiveness of e-learning for undergraduate health professional education. They conducted separate analyses on online learning, which requires an Internet connection, and offline learning, delivered via CD-ROMs or USB flash drives, for example.

The findings, drawn from a total of 108 studies, showed that students acquire knowledge and skills through online and offline e-learning as well as or better than they do through traditional teaching.

E-learning, the use of electronic media and devices in education, is already used by some universities to support traditional campus-based teaching or to enable distance learning. Wider use of e-learning might help to address the need to train more health workers across the globe. According to a recent WHO report, the world is short of 7.2 million health care professionals, and the figure is growing.

The authors suggest that combining e-learning with traditional teaching might be suitable for health care training, as practical skills must also be acquired.

According to Car, from the School of Public Health at Imperial, “E-learning programmes could potentially help address the shortage of healthcare workers by enabling greater access to education, especially in the developing world the need for more health professionals is greatest.”

While the study focused on the education of students, DTI follows a similar approach to continuing education, offering webinars via its Dental Tribune Study Club, which it launched in 2009. The platform regularly offers free online courses and in several languages. The wide range of topics includes general dentistry, implantology, and endodontology. The webinars are presented by experienced speakers and participants are awarded continuing education credits.