November is...Mouth Cancer Action Month

This November healthcare professionals and dental practices all over the country are raising awareness of mouth cancer. Dental Tribune looks at the issues behind the campaign

Mouth Cancer Action Month, organised by the British Dental Health Foundation, is an annual campaign aiming to raise awareness and screening for oral cancer in the UK population.

Sponsored by Denplan and also supported by Dentists’ Provident and the Association of Dental Groups (ADG), The BDHF uses the campaign to call on dentists, doctors and pharmacists to educate members of the general public about a disease that kills more people in the UK than testicular and cervical cancer combined, under the tagline ‘If in doubt, get checked out’.

Latest figures show more than 6,500 new cases a year are diagnosed in the UK, with one person dying every five hours from the disease. As a result, action really must be taken to raise awareness and change these figures. Chief Executive of the British Dental Health Foundation, Dr Nigel Carter OBE, highlights the importance of early detection in the battle against the disease.

Dr Carter said: “If the profession can inform and urge patients that regularly attending check-ups increases the chances of mouth cancer being detected at an early stage, together we can help to raise awareness of this killer disease.

“Almost nine in ten people survive mouth cancer if it is caught early, yet the five year survival rate remains as low as 50 per cent. Encouraging patients to perform self-diagnosis such as looking for ulcers that do not heal within three weeks, red or white patches in the mouth and any unusual lumps or swelling can also help towards early detection.”

Risks
Lifestyle choices heavily influence the risk of developing mouth cancer. Tobacco use, drinking alcohol to excess, poor diet and the human papillomavirus (HPV), often transmitted via oral sex, increase the chances of mouth cancer.

Dr Carter added: “The scale of increasing mouth cancer rates is very worrying. There is a clear gap in public knowledge about what causes mouth cancer that needs to be plugged. Smoking and drinking to excess increase your chances of getting mouth cancer by 30 times as much, yet so many social smokers often light up while having a drink.

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Currently in the UK all girls aged 12-15 are offered the HPV vaccine, given in three injections over the course of a year.

Experts have forecast that the human papillomavirus (HPV), often transmitted via oral sex, will overtake tobacco use as the main risk factor for mouth cancer within the next decade. Despite the high profile case involving Michael Douglas, mouth cancer campaigners the British Dental Health Foundation remain concerned at the lack of awareness about the virus.

Professor Margaret Stanley OBE from the Department of Pathology University of Cambridge, who was the keynote speaker at this year’s Mouth Cancer Action Month Parliamentary Reception in October, strongly voiced her support for men receiving the HPV vaccine. “The burden of HPV
associated cancers is now almost the same in men as in women. Men face a significant and rising risk of HPV-associated disease, and without vaccination men remain at risk.

“It is not fair, ethical or socially responsible to have a public health policy that leaves half of the population vulnerable to infection. This is why men should get the HPV vaccine immediately.”

Dr Carter supported Professor Stanley’s call for giving boys the jab: “The HPV vaccination of young men has already started in Australia and the British Dental Health Foundation is calling for the same to happen in the UK. A wealth of evidence and opinion in the USA suggests a population-wide HPV vaccination programme is now the best solution – for general public health and financial reasons. It is a debate that needs to be opened again here in the UK, as part of the on-going debate about the health and well-being of young people.

“In the UK around one in five cases of oral cancer are predicted to be as a result of HPV, yet our awareness and understanding of the virus is alarmingly low. Cases of mouth cancer have doubled in the last 30 years, coinciding with the rise of HPV, and strengthens the argument that there is not enough awareness of the risks we take when we have unprotected sex.”

Long way to go
Despite the success of previous campaigns, a recent survey shows that there is much more still to do to establish the signs and symptoms of mouth cancer in the public mindset.

The survey asked more than 2,000 people if they could name the four main risk factors for mouth cancer, with no-one able to identify the quartet of smoking, drinking alcohol to excess, poor diet and, despite Michael Douglas’ high profile case, HPV.

Worryingly, a large number of people mistakenly thought bad oral health was responsible for the disease while other answers included stress, smog, anaemia, snoring and even high blood pressure.

Dr Carter said: “For no-one to be able to correctly identify what the four causes of the disease are is both surprising and worrying. The campaign continues to play a crucial role in educating the public about the disease, and it’s clear from the survey we still have some way to go.

“The campaign is a great opportunity for the public to learn about the risks and what to look out for. Ulcers that do not heal within three weeks, red and white patches and unusual lumps or swellings in the mouth should not be ignored. Our advice is clear – if in doubt, get check out.”

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