

SPECIAL FEATURE

Raising awareness of oral cancer at the Royal Cornwall Hospital

By Alison Brown,¹ Guy Lambourn² Ness Avery³ Safiya Robinson⁴ Tanya Lommerse⁵ and Casper Jonker⁶

A diagnosis of cancer can have a devastating effect not only for the patient but also their loved ones, friends and colleagues. The harsh reality is that the number of oral cancer cases in the UK is on the rise. In 2024 alone, 10,825 new cases were diagnosed, an increase of 38% over the past decade and a 133% increase over the last two decades.^{1,2} Referral rates for suspected oral cancer across the whole of the UK dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic; two hospitals in Wales reported a drop of 47%, with an estimated 30–36% drop for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In Cornwall at the Royal Cornwall Hospital (RCH) Dr Tanya Lommerse (Specialist in Oral Surgery) and her team observed an increase in urgent two week wait referrals for suspected oral cancer cases. When asked about her experiences within the hospital, she said the following: 'There has been an increased prevalence of oral cancer nationally, not only alcohol and tobacco driven disease but the national HPV-associated cancer epidemic. This trend is particularly concerning in the context of the specific challenges faced by Cornwall's demographic with known difficulties in accessing dental care.'

To make matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a massive backlog of patients waiting for NHS treatment with a dental workforce that is struggling to cope.³ Interestingly, The State of Mouth Cancer Report 2024 revealed that 68% of oral cancer cases diagnosed were in men, with a higher affinity for people over 60 years of age (roughly 64% of cases).⁴ Unfortunately, only an estimated 20% of the public are aware of the major signs and symptoms of this disease.⁴ Perhaps even more concerning is that the majority (80%) of the population are unable to recall any form of public health messages where this disease was discussed, or even



Fig. 1 Alison Brown with a patient who has been affected by a mouth cancer diagnosis

highlighted.⁵ Considering that approximately 25% of mouth cancers are not associated with any significant risk factors,⁶ it is imperative to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of oral cancers within the UK population.

Previous public health initiatives have included targeted campaigns delivered by passionate individuals from various enterprises and organisations. These campaigns not only raise awareness of this disease among the public, but also among healthcare professionals, as evidenced by the number of patients being referred to secondary care via general medical practitioners in addition to referrals by dental professionals.⁷ The positive impact of such initiatives can only be viewed as a step in the right direction. There remains however, a clear need to explore alternative methods of educating and reaching the public, particularly for those groups most at risk.

One unique initiative was discussed in previous work by Jonker *et al.*¹ In this particular article, undergraduate students from Peninsula

Dental School (PDS) were acknowledged for their efforts raising awareness through their artwork. A competition was held by the Mouth Cancer Foundation (MCF), a UK-based charity, and PDS. During this competition, undergraduates from the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) and Dental Therapy and Hygiene (DTH) courses were requested to create oral cancer awareness leaflets.

On a wider scale, the MCF is actively involved in supporting people affected by cancers of the head and neck region.^{8,9} This charity distributes information and resources to affected patients, their families, carers and the treating clinicians, with an estimated one million people accessing the charities website. Annually MCF produces 25,000 leaflets and provides training in head and neck cancer examination for 1,000 dental professionals.⁸ To support the efforts of the MCF, both PDS and the Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE) have been working closely with the charity to raise awareness in the Southwest of England,¹⁰ where this is of particular importance since alcohol consumption (a known risk factor for certain oral cancers) in the region is higher than the average recorded for England.¹¹ Such an alliance between MCF, PDS and PDSE aids in the delivery of high-quality education, clinical care and oral health promotion.^{12,13}

The most recent event was held at the RCH. The day was led by Mrs Alison Brown, an award-winning dental hygienist, Clinical Supervisor at the Truro Dental Educational Facility (DEF) and Ambassador for the MCF. Alison is passionate about raising awareness for oral cancer in the public domain and led a team consisting of clinical staff, support staff and academics at the RCH in Truro. The day consisted of a staffed mouth cancer awareness stand providing oral cancer leaflets to the public, access to display models for visual

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illustration and banners stipulating the facts surrounding the disease as well as access to knowledgeable staff (Fig. 1).

After the completion of the day, Alison commented: 'The mouth cancer awareness day was a tremendous success. We interacted with the public, and staff, highlighting the risk factors, signs and symptoms and showed them how to carry out a self-screening. All the people we talked to were incredibly grateful for the information and although some saw their own dentist, they were not aware of the signs and symptoms to look out for. Several people stopped and chatted about their own journey with mouth cancer, how it had been found and treated. One person still needed support, and I was able to direct them to the MCF support group. The medical staff were equally interested and supportive of the awareness day and they all commented that following our discussion they understood more about this dreadful disease. The comments we received from the people and their interest matched what studies have shown, namely that people want to know the signs, symptoms and risk factors that

can contribute to mouth cancer, so they can monitor their own health.'

In conclusion, the Mouth Cancer Awareness Day held at RCH successfully raised awareness of this condition in the local area and was a sobering experience for all involved. The day left all of us with a greater insight into the paucity of information and knowledge related to this critical area and even more determined to continue to raise awareness of cancer and more specifically cancer of the head and neck. ■

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Royal Cornwall Hospital for granting permission to use their facilities. Also, a special thank you to all members of staff of PDS and PDSE who participated in this initiative.

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