

The Big C: raising awareness

Andrew Osafo explains how prevention and early detection of mouth cancer can save lives

Dr Andrew Osafo BDS Dip Sed FIADFE

General dentist, CQC dental adviser, and Mouth Cancer Foundation ambassador



Many have found 2020 to be an extremely challenging year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In spite of this, it is important that we do not forget about the other 'Big C': cancer.

As dental professionals, we are in a prime position to raise awareness of mouth cancer and educate the public about this devastating condition. Are we doing this?

Mouth cancer screening

Systematic and regular screenings save lives. We know that early detection of mouth cancer results in a 90% survival rate compared to 50% in late detection of mouth cancer.

The Mouth Cancer Foundation recommends doing a thorough head and neck cancer screening on every patient over the age of 16 at least once a year.

Last year, Dr Ciro Gilvetti and myself wrote an article, published in the December edition of *Dentistry* and available online, explaining how to perform a comprehensive mouth cancer examination.

Adjunctive techniques have been developed to

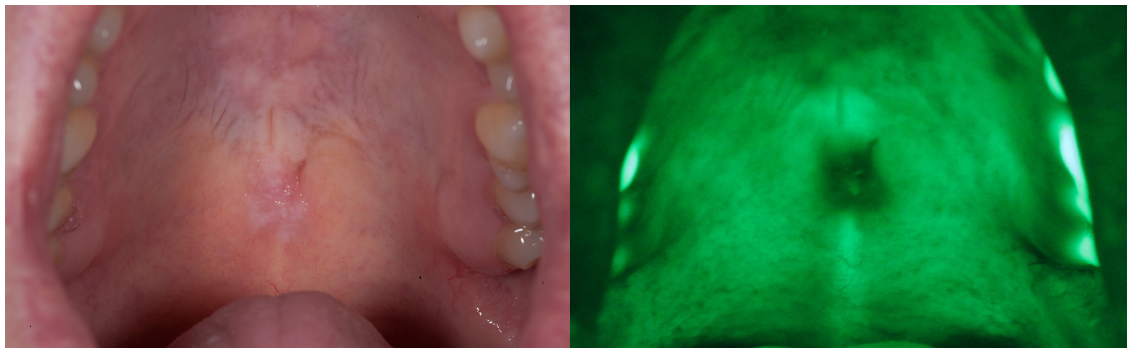


Figure 1: Autofluorescence screening device used to assess tissue. Healthy tissue appears green (emits fluorescence) while abnormal tissue appears dark due to loss of autofluorescence (images courtesy of Addent Inc)

assist healthcare professionals to detect oral mucosal abnormalities. I wrote an article on the adjunctive techniques available for mouth cancer screening, published in the April 2020 edition of *Dentistry* and available online.

For example, autofluorescence imaging is based on the concept that there is a noticeable change in tissue autofluorescence as a result of dysplasia and cancer (Figure 1).

It is important to remember that adjunctive techniques do not replace the mouth cancer clinical examination. These tools are not designed to provide

a diagnosis, but rather should be used to complement and strengthen existing clinical protocols.

Mouth Cancer Action Month

To help raise awareness, Mouth Cancer Action Month takes place throughout November. This initiative is supported by the Oral Health Foundation and the Mouth Cancer Foundation.

The State of Mouth Cancer UK Report 2019/2020 revealed that 74% of British adults have never checked their mouth for signs of cancer. The report also showed that 16% of adults conduct a check once a month. The

Figure 2: The Mouth Cancer 10km Awareness Walk

campaign enables people to become 'mouthaware' and save lives through prevention and early detection. What have you got planned for this year's Mouth Cancer Action Month?

Mouth cancer self-examination is recommended by a number of organisations. The Mouth Cancer Foundation launched 'Bite Back at Mouth Cancer',

Check yourself once a month using our simple 2 minute self check guide.

1. **FACE** - Look for swellings you have not noticed before and inspect your skin. Turn your head from side to side, stretching the skin over the muscles making lumps easier to see.

2. **NECK** - Run your fingers under your jaw and feel either side of your neck. Are there any swellings?

3. **LIPS** - Pull your upper lip upwards and bottom lip downwards. Look inside for any sores or changes in colour.

4. **GUMS** - Examine your gums feeling around the gum for anything unusual.

5. **CHEEKS** - Open your mouth and pull your cheek away one side at a time. Look for any red or white patches. Check for ulcers, lumps or tenderness.

6. **TONGUE** - Gently pull out your tongue and examine one side then the other. Look for swellings, ulcers or changes in colour. Examine the underside of your tongue.

EARLY DETECTION IS KEY!

7. **FLOOR AND ROOF OF MOUTH** - Tilt your head back and open your mouth. Then lift your tongue up and look at the floor of the mouth. Observing changes in colour, ulcers or swellings.

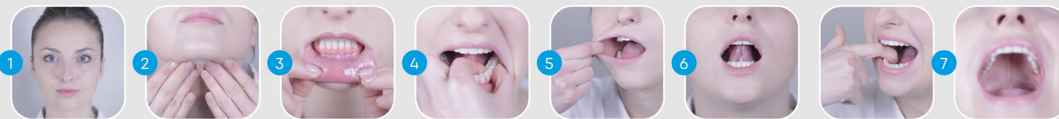


Figure 3: Mouth cancer self-examination (image courtesy of the Mouth Cancer Foundation)

Get involved

Here are some ways to get involved in this year's Mouth Cancer Action Month:

- The Blue Ribbon Appeal
- Arranging events to raise awareness of mouth cancer
- Taking part in the Mouth Cancer 10km Awareness Walk (Figure 2)
- The Blue Lip Selfie campaign
- Donating to mouth cancer charities
- Encouraging mouth cancer self-examinations.

Further reading

- How to screen for mouth cancer: www.dentistry.co.uk/2020/01/06/how-to-screen-mouth-cancer
- Adjunctive techniques for mouth cancer screening: www.dentistry.co.uk/2020/10/19/adjunctive-techniques-mouth-cancer-screening
- The State of Mouth Cancer UK Report 2019/2020: www.dentalhealth.org/thestateofmouthcancer

present with symptoms.

Early detection and diagnosis of mouth cancer dramatically improves survival rates and also makes treatment and rehabilitation easier.

Taking part in Mouth Cancer Action Month is an excellent way to help raise awareness of this devastating condition. I urge you to get involved. To find out more about Mouth Cancer Action Month, visit either the Oral Health Foundation website or the Mouth Cancer Foundation website. **D**

which is a head and neck cancer check that can be carried out by anyone, at any time (Figure 3).

The self-examination should be carried out ideally once a month. If any unusual findings are discovered during the mouth cancer self-examination, an individual should see a dentist or dental specialist for further investigation.

Improving survival rates

Mouth cancer is a serious and debilitating disease that can devastate – and prematurely end – lives. Our goal should be to detect mouth cancers before our patients

TO FIND OUT more, visit www.dentalhealth.org/mouthcancer and www.mouthcancerfoundation.org.