



Dental Awareness Month
August 2004

Media Release
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ORAL CANCER

Oral cancers currently account for up to 6.5 per cent of all cancers diagnosed in Australia¹. More Australians die from oral cancer than cervical cancer each year².

More needs to be done in detection and prevention of oral cancer, according to the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch (ADAVB). Early detection through opportunistic screening, such as that which occurs during regular dental check-ups, offers a simple way to identify those at risk.

Dr Suzanne Hanlin, State President of the ADAVB said, "In order for us to be effective in detection and prevention, the public needs to be diligent about oral health and make regular visits to their dentist."

"If oral cancer is detected early, there is a 70 per cent survival rate in the first five years, compared to 30 per cent if the cancer has spread³," Dr Hanlin added.

Throughout the world, oral cancer is the 6th most common cancer⁴, affecting the tongue, lips, cheeks and soft palate. When statistics for all such cancers are combined, they result in more deaths each year in Australia than cervical cancer.

In 2000 in just one State in Australia (Victoria) 450 people were diagnosed with lip and oral cavity cancers. Of these, 72 died. This compares with 150 Victorians diagnosed with cervical cancer, of whom 52 died [a figure likely to have been reduced through effective screening programs].⁵

The ADAVB will launch a campaign in August to make the public aware of **oral health check-ups**, which all ADAVB dentists conduct as part of a routine visit to the dentist.

As part of the campaign, which coincides with the ADAVB's Dental Awareness Month, the ADAVB will be encouraging people to raise their oral health issues with their dentist. Dr Hanlin claims, "Dentists are not merely dental surgeons, rather they are 'oral physicians'."

¹ Cancer Council, Victoria

² Oral health of Australians, Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, Steering Committee for National Planning of Oral Health, August 2001

³ Hain 1997

⁴ FDI World May/June 1997

⁵ Anti Cancer Council of Victoria 2000

Unfortunately, oral cancer is often ignored in early stages, when it is most easily treated. An Australian study has found that more than one third of patients delayed seeking professional advice for more than three months after first being aware of a lesion.

An oral examination can be the difference. A UK study has confirmed that a thorough examination can be carried out as part of the routine dental inspection.

“Dentists hold a vital role in the early detection of cancer, because they are familiar with the structures of the mouth and due to the regularity with which they should be seeing their patients,” Dr Hanlin said. “However, this relies on the public making a regular oral health check up a part of their overall health routine.

“Dentists routinely examine the soft tissues of the lips and mouth when conducting comprehensive oral examinations. Where they see signs of oral lesions that may be cancerous or pre-cancerous, they often refer the patient for biopsy testing and specialist care,” she added.

“But one of the main roles that can be only done effectively by dentists is to recognise the ‘lumps and bumps’ that are not cancers and quickly reassure patients that they are not at risk,” Dr Hanlin said.

One of the main risk factors for oral cancer is smoking. Smokers in particular should be on the lookout for ulcers or sores that don’t heal as warning signs of oral cancer particularly if these are not painful.

In addition to tobacco, heavy alcohol consumption, poor oral hygiene and age are the most common risk factors, as well as sun exposure to unprotected lips. A healthy diet can also help guard against oral cancer. Fresh yellow-green fruits and vegetables have been identified as helpful dietary components.

www.ada.org.au

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