

Oral Health and Cancer

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Cancer is one of the main priorities of the European Commission mandate for the years 2019-2024 on the health domain and one of the European research and innovation missions and part of the Horizon Europe framework beginning in 2021. European Commission President von der Leyen's political guidelines also underlined that cancer will remain an important topic for the European Commission and its importance was also highlighted in the mission letter to the Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides.

Oral cancer includes cancers of the lip, tongue and oral cavity. There are more than 10 million new cases and more than 6 million deaths each year worldwide and it is projected that by 2020 there will be every year 15 million new cancer cases and 10 million cancer deaths. In Europe, oral cancer is the 10th most common cancer, with around 75,000 new cases diagnosed each year in the EU. As dentists we know that regular check-ups of our patients are an important chance for us to examine the mouth for signs of oral cancer. In fact, with oral cancer being one of the most common causes of morbidity and mortality today, we face important obligations, challenges and opportunities to save lives.

Excessive alcohol consumption, any form of tobacco use, infections of oral mucosa (*Candida albicans*), other factors such as being on an immune suppression regime enhance the incidence of oral cancer. Studies show that oral cancer mostly affects people in lower socio-economic groups. Incidence rates are correlated to socio-economic status (education, income, occupation). These socially vulnerable and excluded groups of population face a higher burden of oral cancer and a greater barrier to accessing prevention and treatment.

What is missing and what needs to be done?

But beyond these facts and figures, what information are we still missing and what do we still need to do? There are three main causes of delay in diagnosis: patient, healthcare professional and health system. Studies show that patients often ignore oral cancer symptoms and/or have poor access to healthcare, general practitioners happen to misinterpret the symptoms of the disease and, health systems are overwhelmed with costs and ongoing priorities. Furthermore, the lack of public awareness about oral cancer, its symptoms and causes are also alarming. However, there are things that can be done to tackle these issues. The delay related to patients can be tackled through educational campaigns to increase knowledge about tobacco and alcohol, healthy diet and HPV. When it comes to the healthcare professional delay, dentists must be well-prepared to diagnose oral cancer. In this regard it is important to stress the importance of screening test for oral cancer consisting of a visual oral examination and palpation of the neck. Undergraduate education and continuous education must be designed in a way to equip dental professionals with the necessary skills.

However, oral cancer is a disease that is highly preventable. This can be done through education, increasing public awareness and improving the health systems. As dentists, we also have an important role to play in terms of health promotion, initiating discussion on smoking cessation, on reducing alcohol consumption and providing lifestyle counselling. Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) being one of



the main risk factors for oral cancer, the vaccination against HPV for boys and girls at a young age is of fundamental importance.

CED believes that an EU policy on oral cancer is needed. Further, education at undergraduate level for both dentists and general practitioners is needed. On a national level, national health policies should be developed for oral cancer prevention strategies, through integration with wider health literacy and messages in interdisciplinary education programmes. As the disease remains highly lethal and very aggressive and one of the most debilitating and disfiguring of all malignancies with 50% of those diagnosed not surviving 5 years, the topic needs to get the necessary attention. CED will continue promoting the topic of oral health and cancer on the European level.