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Review article

The role of general dental practitioners in the detection of early-stage oral malignancies—A review

Naida Hadziabdic^{a,*}, Halid Sulejmanagic^b, Amina Kurtovic-Kozaric^c

^a Department of Oral Surgery, Faculty of Dental Medicine, University of Sarajevo, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

^b Private Dental Practice “Sulejmanagić”, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

^c Department of Pathology, Cytology, and Human Genetics, Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Since early diagnosis plays an important role in oral cancer prognosis, a general dental practitioner's ability to recognize the clinical signs and symptoms is crucial. This review describes the role of general dental practitioners in the recognition of the early stage of oral cancer. To create guidelines for general dental practitioners, several aspects were evaluated: risk factors for the most common oral cancers and precancer, their early signs and symptoms, the role of oral screening in oral cancer prevention, and the importance of a biopsy. The authors also included five case reports which serve as examples for the significance of early detection of oral malignancies.

Conclusion: The general dental practitioners' role in the detection of early stage of oral cancers and other oral cavity malignant diseases is invaluable and it is of crucial importance.

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* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Dental Medicine, University of Sarajevo, Department of Oral Surgery, Bolnička 4A, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
E-mail address: nsulejma@yahoo.com (N. Hadziabdic).

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1. Introduction

The attention of scientific community has recently been captured by problem of oral malignancies, especially the oral cancer [1–8]. Oral cancer is even more lethal than breast or prostate cancer. It is estimated that every hour in the United States one person dies from the consequences of oral cancer [9,10]. Recent studies have shown that the additional worrying factors for the development of head, neck and tongue cancers are young age and female gender, which are discussed in this review [5,11].

Oral cancer appears in 2% [12] and squamous cell carcinoma appears in 3% of all cancer cases [13]. Squamous cell carcinoma epidemiology shows that this is the sixth most common cancer in general and that it has a growing tendency [14]. The highest oral cancer incidence can be found in developing countries like Pakistan, Brazil, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh (25%) and France (6%) as a developed country [2,3]. In India, the oral cancer incidence is extremely high; among all malignant diseases oral cancer is 40% [5].

Among oral cancers, squamous cell carcinoma is the most common (90%) followed by adenocarcinoma and small salivary glands tumours (5%), verrucous carcinoma and lymphoma (2%), and the rest among which we can find rare sarcoma and other odontogenic tumours [2].

Despite the fact that the oral cavity is available for examinations and therapy, oral cancer mortality rate is 49% [15], which shows that the survival rate did not get any higher in the last decade even though there has been a great progress made in therapeutic approach [16]. Moreover, the survival rate is the lowest in oral cancer field [17] because 50% of oral cancers are detected when they already enter the second or third stage [18]. Considering the sex

distribution, male patients older than 50 years are more frequent than women in ratio of 1,5:1 [5,19]. The incidence growth as well as mortality rate growth are noted on the global level, so it is estimated that 500,000 patients suffer from this particular disease in the whole world [14].

The early diagnosis plays a very important role in the oral cancer prognosis. Recognition of the clinical signs and oral manifestation observed by the general dental practitioner is of the crucial importance. It is considered that a general examination with emphasis on the oral cancer detection lasts 90 s only [1]. Every clinician who detects precancerous lesion that can be treated in the right time makes the survival rate of the patient higher [1]. Since dentists have an opportunity to examine oral and perioral region, they play an important role in early detection of the oral cancer. The role of the dentist is not only in the aesthetics (repairing the teeth, executing the prosthetic work, etc.), but that they can also deal with the matter of life or death. A detailed dental check-up with the emphasis on oral cancer early detection can save millions of human lives [1].

Driven by the facts stated above, the goal of this review is to understand the role of the general dental practitioner in the detection of early stage of oral cancer. Authors present some of their own experiences gained during the long-term dental and oral surgical practice.

2. Risk factors for the oral cancer emergence

The most common etiologic factors for oral carcinoma are tobacco and alcohol consumption, which can act either individually or synergistically. If a person uses both, the effect is multiplied [2,5]. Tobacco consumption increases the risk of getting oral cancer—if the

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