

“CANCER PHOBIA”: A PRELIMINARY STUDY IN A GROUP OF SRI LANKAN PATIENTS

**C.J. SENEVIRATNE, A.D.S. ATHUKORALA, A. ARIYAWARDANA AND
M.A.M. SITHEEQUE**

Department of Oral Medicine and Periodontology, Faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya

Oral cancer is the most prevalent cancer in Sri Lanka and many health education programmes have been launched recently through mass media to educate people regarding oral cancer prevention. In recent times the number of individuals seeking care for “suspected oral cancer” at the Oral Medicine clinic has increased. However, when examined the majority of them did not have either cancer or precancer in their mouths. Instead, they had only a fear of cancer (cancer phobia). Therefore, this study was undertaken to find out the causes of “cancer phobia” and its implications.

The study included 28 patients (17 females and 11 males) who visited the Oral Medicine clinic complaining of oral lesions for which they suspected “cancer” as the cause. The mean age of the sample was 39 years. 45%, 24% and 17.1% had complained of a white patch, an ulcer and a lump respectively. A thorough clinical examination was carried out for all subjects and radiological examinations were done for relevant cases. Sixty two percent of the individuals had no abnormalities and were referring to normal structures in the mouth as “cancer like lesions” and 34.5% had non-malignant lesions. Furthermore, 37.9% of individuals had symptoms such as pain, burning sensation or headache in relation to the site of affliction or elsewhere. Nevertheless, there was one case with cancer phobia whose investigations ultimately revealed frank malignancy in the mouth.

The patients were also inquired as to how they thought that the lesions they were complaining of could be due to oral cancer. It was found that 65.5% of the individuals developed a fear of oral cancer after listening to/watching education programmes on radio/TV or reading newspapers. Nearly 21% of the individuals developed cancer phobia after the recent death of a relative due to cancer.

Following thorough explanation and reassurance it was possible to eradicate cancer phobia from the minds of 62% individuals who had no symptoms. However, the rest who developed symptoms (37.9%) needed drug therapy and counseling to eliminate fear and associated symptoms. This was common among females ($P=0.006$).

Complaints of “cancer phobia” should not be disregarded. Careful analysis of the impacts of cancer phobia and proper reassurance is important in managing such patients. Furthermore, health education programmes regarding oral cancer and pre-cancer should be carefully planned in such a way not to induce phobia in the minds of people.