

## **AWARENESS OF ORAL CANCER AND PRECANCER AMONG PATIENTS ATTENDING A HOSPITAL**

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Oral cancer is a preventable disease and this could be done to a great extent through public education. To the best of our knowledge, public awareness about oral cancer and precancer in Sri Lanka is yet to be reported. Therefore, the aim of this survey was to assess the awareness about oral cancer and precancer among patients attending the Dental Hospital, Faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

Data were collected by means of self-administered questionnaire distributed among 410 randomly selected out-patients who attended the Dental Hospital, Faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. The questionnaire included questions to ascertain information related to socio-demographic data, awareness of oral cancer and precancer, habits of betel chewing, smoking and alcohol consumption.

The sample consisted of 250 females and 160 males with an average age of 32.3 years (range 14-83 years). Ninety five percent of the respondents were aware of oral cancer as a disease and gender did not influence the awareness ( $\chi^2=1.738$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $P=0.18$ ). Only 44.9% ( $n=184$ ) were aware about precancer in the mouth. There was no gender difference with respect to awareness of precancer ( $\chi^2=1.396$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $P=0.237$ ). The awareness of oral cancer did not differ among the various age groups ( $\chi^2=6.40$ ,  $df=5$ ,  $P=0.269$ ). The greatest awareness about precancer was in the 25-34 year old age group (58.4%) while the lowest (30%) was in the over 65-year old age group. With respect to the awareness of precancer, there was a significant difference among the age groups ( $\chi^2=13.41$ ,  $df=5$ ,  $P=0.02$ ). The awareness of oral cancer increased with the increase in the level of education. Of the 390 individuals who were aware of the existence of oral cancer, 80.7% were knowledgeable about its association with the habit of betel chewing with tobacco as an ingredient in the quid. 46.6% and 16.9% were aware of the association between tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption and oral cancer respectively. However, 17.7% ( $n=69$ ) of those who were aware of oral cancer, were not knowledgeable about the association between oral cancer and habits. Of the 390 individuals who were aware of oral cancer, 88.7% mentioned that early detection would give a better treatment outcome. However, 5.9% were not aware of treatment modalities available for oral cancer and the rest (5.4%) mentioned that oral cancer could not be treated.

It was evident from this study that the patients attending the hospital are well informed about the oral cancer and its relationship to the habit of betel chewing. However, awareness about precancer was poor. Awareness about the causative relationship between tobacco smoking, use of alcohol and oral cancer and precancer was comparatively lower than the relationship between betel chewing with tobacco to oral cancer and pre cancer. Therefore, it is very important to make the public aware about precancer, their signs and symptoms and causative relationships as malignant transformation of these conditions could be easily prevented by early intervention.

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