

Let's talk about mouth cancer

Edinburgh based Orna Ni Choileain and Niall McGoldrick recently received the Association of Dental Groups (ADG) Postgraduate Bursary Award for the "Best voluntary scheme to promote and deliver improvements in oral health 2015". Here Orna discusses their project, "Let's Talk About Mouth Cancer" and the motivation behind its conception.

Mouth cancer is one of the fastest growing cancers in the UK, with incidence rates in Scotland being the highest. In fact, within just 9 months of graduating, I had come across my first case in general practice.

But the initial concept for the project had its roots well before this in both Niall's and my undergraduate careers. In October 2013, the British Society for Oral Medicine and Cancer Research UK published the "Statement on Mouth Cancer Diagnosis and Prevention" and this, alongside our experience of screening programmes at university inspired us to see if there was something we could do to help raise awareness of mouth cancer. Thus, Let's Talk About Mouth Cancer was born.

However, we were soon keen to do more than simply raise awareness, choosing instead to be more proactive and looking to directly involve and educate healthcare professionals and the public.

We know that the prognosis of the patient diagnosed with mouth cancer is greatly improved through early detection and believe the screening experience to be a powerful educational tool that can equip the public with knowledge. We also know that some mouth cancers are preventable so we hoped that through raising awareness and providing counsel on responsible drinking, smoking cessation and a healthy lifestyle we could encourage the public to take more responsibility for their own oral health.

Therefore our aim in creating the Let's Talk About Mouth Cancer campaign was to generate an improvement in cancer prognosis through early detection by offering free mouth cancer screenings and open access CPD sessions. This would then facilitate self-examination and encourage early presentation to a healthcare professional.

In our first year we held a number of successful events across Edinburgh. The first was a 3-day mouth cancer screening and public awareness campaign in which 600 members of the public engaged, with a total of 455 people screened. This was followed by evenings of CPD lectures highlighting the significance of the early detection and prevention of mouth cancer, delivered to dental and healthcare professionals by Professor Victor Lopes, Consultant Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon. The success of our first event was quickly followed by two smaller mouth cancer

screening sessions, where a further 272 people were screened, alongside awareness and fund raising activities.

The success of these events wouldn't have been possible without the help and support of a number of charitable organisations and hardworking volunteers, including NHS Lothian, the Minority Ethnic Health Inclusion Service (MEHIS), the University of Edinburgh, the Department of Oral Surgery from the Edinburgh Dental Institute, the Ben Walton Trust (SC024990), Dental Protection and many more.

In September 2014, our year of hard work paid off, and Let's Talk About Mouth Cancer was awarded charitable status (SC045100). To accompany our new position, we further developed the charity's official aims, which are:

- to improve the prognosis of a patient with mouth cancer through early detection
- to support research into improving diagnostic tools
- to raise awareness of mouth cancer amongst the general public
- to share knowledge and good practice amongst healthcare professionals.

Our initial success has continued this year and following on-going funding and support from dental sector sponsors, including the Postgraduate Bursary from ADG, Let's Talk About Mouth Cancer returned to Edinburgh's Bristo Square in March to repeat the mouth cancer awareness campaign. This year, patients were taught how to self-examine and we changed the focus to concentrate more on educating and empowering patients around what to recognise in their own mouths.

Again, the events on the day were followed by a free CPD lecture, "Empowerment in Mouth Cancer: Your Patient, from Diagnosis to Rehabilitation". This was heard by 114 dental and healthcare professionals and was delivered by 4 speakers, each with their own perspective of the mouth cancer treatment journey: an oral and maxillofacial consultant, a mouth cancer patient, a head and neck cancer nurse and a restorative dentist. This event was well received and we have continued to enjoy on-going support from across the profession.

Oral cancer affects people of all ages, and with the number of cases on the rise it is essential to continue to raise awareness, encouraging early diagnosis. For more information visit www.letstalkaboutmouthcancer.wordpress.com.

For more information about the ADG visit www.dentalgroups.co.uk.