



What Can The Health Care System Do to Lessen the Burden of Oral Cancer?

Dobrossy L*

Department of Cancer, National Public Health Centre, Hungary

Editorial

Oral cancer is a collective term. It includes a dozen of cancers of the oropharyngeal region (C_0 to C_{14}). That is recently named as head and cancer. Worldwide, oral cancers account for more than 650.000 new cases and 330.000 deaths annually [1]. Tobacco use, alcohol consumption and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) are widely considered to be the major risk factors. The end results of the clinical treatment are rather poor, therefore, primary prevention via health education, and secondary prevention, i.e. screening for detection of oral cancers early when are more amenable to curative treatment are the methods of choice. The methods of screening are quite simple: inspection and palpation; those with “positive” findings need to be referred to specialists.

Up to now, the effectiveness of such a screening was studied in a single Randomized Trial (RCT) in Kerala, India, in which a moderate decrease of mortality has been reported; however, then results of this RCT were not statistically significant [2]. According to the state-of-the art, population screening programs cannot be organized when the effectiveness of screening is not proved [3]. Opportunistic screening seems to be promising, but its potential is not exploited at all. Why?.

At this point, the question arises: whose task then oral screening should be?. Obviously, the dentists and the dental hygienists are the first candidates for the task, but they are reluctant to take up the job, arguing that they are to care the dental patients. Similarly, the primary care personnel so not consider oral screening as their own job, either.

Selective screening - initiated by the health authority- of those at high risk for oral cancer might offer a solution, however, the target persons of oral screening (males over 40 years of age, heavy smokers, heavy drinkers, negligent of oral hygiene, poorly educated, from lower social-economic groups etc.) are hardly available for screening, as they are not those who regularly visit a dental office [4].

In the meantime, oral cancer continues killing our population. Something should be done! What should be done?.

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*Correspondence:

Dobrossy L, Department of Cancer,
National Public Health Centre,
Budapest, Hungary,
E-mail: dobrossy@freemail.hu

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