RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

Promoting Oral Cancer Awareness and Early Detection using a Mass Media Approach

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Less than 50% of oral cancer cases are diagnosed at early stages of the disease and this is in part due to poor awareness and lack of knowledge on the signs and symptoms of oral cancer. This study sought to measure the baseline awareness of oral cancer in Malaysia and aimed to increase public awareness and knowledge of oral cancer using a mass media campaign. Methods: Baseline awareness and impact of the campaign was measured using self-administered questionnaires sent via email to individuals. The campaign was aired on two national television channels and the reach was monitored through an independent programme monitoring system. Results: 78.2% of respondents had heard of oral cancer, and this increased significantly after the campaign. However, the ability to recognize signs and symptoms remains unchanged. We found that the level of awareness differed between the distinct ethnic subgroups and the reach of the campaign was not uniform across all ethnicities. Conclusion: This substantial study to measure the oral cancer awareness in Malaysia provides important baseline data for the planning of public health policies. Despite encouraging evidence that a mass media campaign could increase the awareness of oral cancer, further research is required to address the acceptability, comprehensiveness and effectiveness. Furthermore, different campaign approaches may be required for specific ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic country such as Malaysia.

Keywords: Oral cancer - cancer awareness - cancer survey - campaign - mass media - Malaysia

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Introduction

Oral cancer is a significant disease worldwide with up to 400,000 new cases each year and almost 130,000 deaths annually (Ferlay et al., 2010). Notably, 80% of these cases occur in the South and South East Asian countries. The incidence of oral cancer is increasing in many countries mainly because of the prevalence of smoking and alcohol consumption, the primary factors. In many Asian countries including Malaysia, the situation is compounded by the practice of betel quid chewing (Lee et al., 2011). Regardless of the risk factors contributing to oral cancer development, the most important factor that alters patient survival is the stage at which the cancer is detected (Ries et al., 1999). The mouth is easily accessible for clinical or even self-examination, and as demonstrated in some feasibility studies, early detection of oral cancer is theoretically possible (Warnakulasuriya et al., 1984; Mathew et al., 1997, Sankaranarayanan, 1997). However, many benign mouth disorders may appear similar to oral cancer or precancer and knowledge of some specific features of cancer may likely raise awareness of the public to seek attention early. Raising awareness empowers people to present early. The proportion of oral cancer cases diagnosed at an early and localised stage is still less than fifty percent (Patton et al., 2006) resulting in an appalling 5-year survival rate of about 50% (Rogers et al., 2009). Current evidence suggests that this is in part due to poor public awareness of the disease itself and the associated signs and symptoms of oral cancer and premalignant lesions (Boyle et al., 1993). For example, in the United Kingdom, oral cancer is one of the least heard of cancers with only 56% of participants questioned being aware of

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