Oral cancer screening in private dental practices in a developing country: opportunities and challenges


Abstract - Objectives: Private dental practitioners constitute approximately 40% of all registered dentists in Malaysia, and this group affords an avenue for prevention and early detection of oral cancer. However, such activities are still limited. This study investigated the feasibility of incorporating opportunistic screening of oral cancer in the private dental setting. Methods: Dentists were recruited through two main dental associations in Malaysia and attended a 1-day training session on recognizing abnormalities within the oral cavity. Following the training, the dentists conducted screening and provided risk habits cessation advice at their respective clinics for 6 months. The impact of the program was evaluated by determining the number of patients who were screened and/or provided with risk habits cessation advice. Results: Twenty-six dentists took part in the program and conducted opportunistic screening on a total of 2,603 individuals. On average, they screened about 25.6% of their patients and 53% were given risk habits cessation advice. Notably, dentists who had lower patient load were more likely to conduct opportunistic screening. Conclusions: While the participating private dentists state that they have a role in performing opportunistic screening and providing risk habits cessation advice, these activities are still not a priority area in the private clinics, strongly suggesting that strategies to motivate dentists in this setting are urgently needed.

Key words: early detection and prevention; opportunistic screening; oral cancer; oral cancer awareness; private dentist

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Despite the easy accessibility of the oral cavity for examination to detect early signs of oral cancer (OC), it remains a highly lethal disease. Notably, in Malaysia, OC ranks as the second most common cause of cancer-related deaths among males in the country and this is in part because of late disease presentation where 70% of patients with OC present at stage III/IV. While previous studies have associated OC with low socioeconomic status, data in Malaysia are not available. However, most Malaysians are not familiar with the early signs and symptoms of OC, and this could be a major factor influencing late disease presentation. Therefore, efforts in raising awareness on OC among the Malaysian public will be an important factor in improving survival through early detection of the disease.

Dentists are usually the first healthcare professionals who are approached to treat conditions in the oral cavity, making them well suited to perform opportunistic screening for OC, to improve early detection and to disseminate information about OC. Moreover, up to one-third of the Malaysian population visit a dentist (either in the public