3921 North Carolina Dental Hygienists' Oral Cancer Knowledge, Practices and Opinions

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Given the increasing 10 year incidence of oral and pharyngeal cancer in North Carolina (NC), all health care providers must participate in risk reduction and early detection efforts. Objective: To assess NC dental hygienists’ (DHs) knowledge of oral cancer (OC) risk factors (RFs), signs and symptoms, and opinions and practices regarding OC examinations. Methods: A 40-item survey was mailed to a simple random sample of 1,223 DHs from a registry of 4,076 licensed in NC. Data from 651 completed surveys (effective RR=57%) were entered and analyzed in EpiInfo 2002. Results: Most correctly identified tobacco (99%) and alcohol (87%) use, fewer identified human papilloma virus (47%) and low consumption of fruits and vegetables (27%), and many incorrectly identified poor fitting dentures (72%) as OC RFs. Erythroplakia and leukoplakia were identified by 71% as the 2 conditions most associated with OC, and 52% identified the tongue and floor of mouth as the 2 most common sites for OC. Many (76%) indicated the patient as asymptomatic in early OC and correctly identified the appearance and feel of early OC lesions (74%) and lymph nodes (65%). Some agreed their knowledge of OC was current (48%) and felt adequately trained to examine patients for OC (58%); 68% strongly agreed they were comfortable referring patients with suspicious lesions. Only a few agreed their patients were knowledgeable about OC RFs (30%) and signs and symptoms (20%), and only 31% and 14% agreed they were adequately trained to provide tobacco and alcohol cessation education, respectively. Most reported assessment of patients’ present tobacco use (92%) in medical histories, but only 55% assessed present alcohol use. Conclusions: There is a need for increased education regarding OC RFs, signs and symptoms, and risk assessment among DHs in NC. Tobacco and alcohol cessation education would benefit both providers and their patients.

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