Reviewer's report

Title: Oral Cancer Awareness of Undergraduate Medical and Dental Students

Version: 2 Date: 14 July 2007

Reviewer: Wendy Mouradian

Reviewer's report:

General
1. This paper presents a cross-sectional study of undergraduate medical and dental students at the University of Dundee, assessing students’ oral health knowledge and clinical practices. The study is able to assess students’ awareness and to make comparisons between the medical and dental cohorts. This study address an important question – are medical and dental students adequately trained to detect this cancer and counsel patients accordingly? Oral cancer rates are on the rise, but should be detectable at an early stages because of the accessibility of the oral cavity (if examined!) While there has been some research in this important field already, it is important to note the continued ignorance of important risk factors, of presenting signs, and the lack of emphasis placed upon the oral exam in medical school. This important gap in medical education is only beginning to receive the attention it should.

2. The methods of the study are appropriate and well-described and could be replicated at other institutions interested in improving their students’ oral cancer knowledge and clinical practices.

3. For the most part the discussion and conclusions are well balanced and supported by the data. (see below)

4. Regarding students’ request for more information on oral cancer, the high request rates among students may be prompted by the survey. It would be interesting to know what percentage of “unprompted” medical and dental students identify the need for more information on oral cancer (do they even know what they don’t know?)

5. The paper is very well written, easy to read and logically presented. It is supported by a literature review.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

none

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. For a cross sectional study the methodology and presentation of data appears
adequate. Since the questionnaire was returned by all students “attending the lecture,” the total students should be presented so the reader knows what percent this represents.

2. Table 1 reports “IQ” range – IQ is not defined and should be.

3. The fact that it is a cross-sectional study limits the conclusions that can be drawn comparing students’ knowledge and practices across the years of training. Curricular factors, public awareness campaigns or changes in faculty, for example, could all contribute to different levels of awareness among students at different levels of training. The inclusion of tables presenting knowledge across the years of training (Fig 3-4) may be misleading – the authors should make a comment about this limitation in the text.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Unless there are specific length limitations the authors might consider highlighting more of the important results in the abstract.

2. I found myself wishing for even more discussion of the widespread lack of oral health knowledge among physicians, and the failure of medical education to adequately address this issue. Clearly there are grave consequences for patient health when physicians ignore this part of the physical exam and history taking. The failure to examine for lymphadenopathy is appalling. There was no real discussion of the curriculum at Dundee.

3. The authors may be interested in published work on the other side of the Atlantic addressing oral health knowledge of medical students, including oral cancer:


What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.