



## RESEARCH NEWS

## Referring patients with suspected oral cancer to dentists may delay diagnosis, say GPs

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National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance that GPs should refer patients suspected of having oral cancer to a dentist may delay diagnosis, researchers have warned.<sup>1</sup>

The guidelines state that patients with a lump on their lip or in their oral cavity or who have a red or red and white patch in their oral cavity should be sent for assessment for possible oral cancer by a dentist within two weeks of seeing their GP.<sup>2</sup>

If GPs follow the guidance then the emphasis is placed on the patient to attend, regardless of whether they are registered with a dentist, can afford to pay for dental services, or whether one is readily accessible, say the researchers in the *British Journal of General Practice*. They also raise concerns that there is no electronic or paper trail for referral from GPs to primary care dentists and no electronic or paper trail back.

The incidence of oral cancer is increasing. In 2016 there were 7056 cases of cancer of the oral cavity, lip, and pharynx in England. Diagnosis is often made at a late stage which affects survival. There is more than 80% survival in those with localised disease, compared with less than 30% in those with advanced disease. Only 50.9% of the adult population was seen by an NHS dentist in the 24 month period up to January 2018.

Jane Wilcock, a Greater Manchester GP, and colleagues carried out a systematic review of primary care and early oral cancer diagnosis. They found a lack of research in this area with only

16 studies which focused on oral squamous cell carcinoma diagnosis, six of them from the UK.

In the UK, more than 55% of patients with oral cancer were referred by their GP and 44% by their dentist. On average, patients had two to three consultations before they were referred to a specialist and delays were similar whether patients initially saw a GP or a dentist. Although one study found greater delays attributed to dentists as they had undertaken dental procedures.

One of the UK studies included in the analysis showed that GPs were more often suspicious of oral cancer than dentists in patients subsequently diagnosed with oral cancer (52% vs 20.5%,  $P < 0.01$ ). Another UK study found that in secondary care when staff interpreted referral letters, 27% from GPs were interpreted as urgent compared with 7% from dentists.

The authors concluded: "There was no evidence that GPs performed less well than dentists, which calls into question the NICE cancer option to refer to dentists, particularly in the absence of robust auditable pathways."

- 1 Grafton-Clarke CK, Wilcock J. Diagnosis and referral delays in primary care for oral squamous cell cancer: a systematic review. *Br J Gen Pract* 2018;(November). 10.3399/bjgp18X700205.
- 2 National Institute of Health and Care Excellence. Suspected cancer: recognition and referral. June 2015, updated July 2017. [www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng12](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng12).

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