

## Letter to the Editor

### Did the March 2020 lockdown cause an increase in patients presenting to the emergency department with odontogenic pain and infection? A single centre, retrospective analysis

Sir,

We would like to support and applaud the review paper by Gray et al that highlighted the increase in emergency department (ED) presentations with odontogenic pain and infection during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Worryingly, in our experience it did not only increase attendance of these patients, but also significantly affected another vulnerable population, those with suspected oral cancers. During this unprecedented time, with a government-mandated lockdown and lack of access to primary medical and dental services, we saw an increase in patients presenting to the ED with advanced head and neck cancer. GP referrals via the two-week wait pathway were reported to have reduced by up to 84% in this same period.<sup>2</sup>

We performed an extensive review of head and neck cancer presentations to the ED in our North London teaching hospital between March 2020 and October 2021.<sup>3</sup> Of 34 patients presenting to the ED with suspicious oral lesions, nine were subsequently diagnosed with oral cancer. Unfortunately, all of them were graded as stage IV cancers and only one was suitable for ablative surgery. When we came to analyse and interpret our data, two of these patients sadly had already passed away due to their disease, and a further three were experiencing cancer recurrence or progression despite active treatment.

Even though non-urgent dental care services gradually resumed in England on 8 June 2020, we are still not at pre-pandemic levels of NHS dental activity. In the 24 months up to 30 June 2022, 16.4 million adults were seen by an NHS dentist compared to 21 million in the 24 months up to 30 June 2020.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly concerning considering

how oral cancer screenings are opportunistically performed during routine dental examinations.

Additionally, as we are currently enduring a cost-of-living crisis, for many of those unable to access NHS dental care, private dentistry is not an economically viable option. The Office for National Statistics reported that in the 12 months up to October 2022, the Consumer Price Index, including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH), rose by 9.6%.<sup>5</sup>

To avoid future catastrophe, more needs to be done by the government to ensure access to NHS primary care medical and dental services. This access is a long-standing issue pre-dating the pandemic, but the collateral damage exacerbated by COVID-19 has highlighted the unforgivable results of this apathetic system, the price of which is being borne more heavily by those who are more vulnerable.

#### Conflict of interest

None.

#### Ethics approval

N/A.

#### Patients permission/consent

N/A.

#### References

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