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A subtype of head and neck cancer, oral cancer is one of the few cancer types to be exponentially on the rise. In a presentation to be held this afternoon as part of IDEM’s scientific programme, US dentist Dr Barry Freydberg will discuss the importance of early detection.

today international: Dr Freydberg, is the rise of oral cancer cases a worldwide trend or is it limited to certain regions?

Dr Barry Freydberg: I have to assume it is a worldwide trend. In North America alone, the number of people who have developed oral cancer increased from 37,000 in 2009 to 46,000 last year. This development is due to the fact that the demographics for this type of cancer have changed significantly. Oral cancer used to affect mainly middle-aged men who smoked regularly or consumed too much alcohol. Now, it is increasingly diagnosed in younger people and particularly women.

What are the reasons for this shift in demographics?

While cases that appear to have been caused by smoking seem to have gone down through measures like anti-smoking legislation, more patients now seem to be developing the condition because of the human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted infection that can lead to oral cancer. One of the reasons for this is probably unprotected sexual activity among people who are 18 years and older. While we have seen many oral cancers in 60-year-olds, we are now looking more carefully at people well before they have reached that age.

Has the role of dental professionals in oral cancer detection changed in recent years?

Dentists should absolutely be the ones who are looking for oral cancer, as we are the ones who know the oral tissue best, along with ear, nose and throat physicians. By being familiar with the tissue and knowing what does not look normal, we should be the ones screening it on a regular basis, just as we should be screening patients for blood pressure or things like sleep apnoea. Even the American Medical Association has agreed to that position in a recent article.

We also see the patients more regularly than other members of the medical profession do, as they often come in for preventative visits instead of visiting us only when they have a health problem.

Dentists still appear to overlook early signs of the condition however. What makes these lesions so difficult to detect?

Oral cancer starts when changes in the tissue underneath the mucosa occur. Lesions become cancerous once they break through the basement membrane of the tissue. The problem is that all this happens in a part of the mouth where one cannot see it just by doing a visual exam.

The ideal time to detect these lesions would be when they are premalignant but at this stage