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Delayed Presentation of Oral Cancer Patients Visiting a Tertiary Care Center in Sunsari District, Nepal: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background

Delayed diagnosis of oral cancer has been attributed as main reason for poor patient survival rates. This is influenced by patient's health seeking behavior. By exploring health seeking behavior leading to late presentation, greater and in-depth understanding can be gained about potential barriers which when addressed will fill the existing gaps. This study aimed to understand the health seeking behaviour of oral cancer patients in order to better understanding of factors causing their delayed presentation to tertiary care center at Sunasri district, Nepal.

Methods

Following ethical approval a qualitative study was conducted including patients over 18 years of age with histopathologically proven oral squamous cell carcinoma. A written informed consent was obtained and interview was conducted using in-depth interview guide at private room. An audio recording of the interviews was made along with handwritten notes to facilitate data analysis. Data was

scrutinized, charted and sorted according to key issues and themes using five steps: transcription, familiarization, coding, identifying a thematic framework; and interpretation.

Results

A saturation point was obtained with 12 interviews. Analysis revealed six major themes influencing their health care seeking behavior and lived experience. The major themes identified were patient delay due to symptom appraisal and normalization, use of informal or local care, structural and access barriers, family and social influence, functional and daily life impact and psychological concern and fear of cancer.

Conclusion

Patients with oral cancer often delay seeking professional care due to initial symptom normalization and reliance on informal or local treatments. Symptom appraisal and normalization, structural barriers, use of informal care and psychological factors contribute to delayed presentation. Addressing these factors is essential to promote early diagnosis and timely management.

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