How a dental therapist saved a patient's life

Julie Bissett explains how dental care professionals can be perfectly placed to spot potential skin cancers.

A £40 online education course gave a dental therapist the confidence to make a life-saving decision – and now she wants dental teams to sign up so they too can advise patients about the risks of undetected skin cancer.

A suspicious-looking mole on the nose of one of her patients alarmed Sarah Breslin, a dental therapist working in and around Kent.

Having recently undertaken an online course developed by national skin cancer awareness charity Skcin, she urged the woman to seek

medical advice. Without the qualification, she says, she may not have been brave enough to raise her concerns.

Sarah Breslin, whose interest in skincare stems for her time spent in the oral surgery department at King's College London, has expanded her treatment protocols to include facial aesthetics. But it was not until she embarked on the MASCED (Melanoma And Skin Cancer Detection) Pro course run by Skcin that she felt able to discuss her concerns with patients regarding any skin irregularities.

Sarah recalls: 'It was during lockdown

when I saw a new patient, Jane, at one of the practices where I work – The Implant Experts in Maidstone, Kent. Jane had a mole located on the side of her nose (Fig. 1). She had had it checked the year before and had been advised that all was okay. But if the appearance of it changed, then she was told she should contact her GP.

'I advised her that I really wasn't happy with the appearance of the mole and I felt it warranted a second look. Thankfully, she took my advice. She was diagnosed with melanoma and had to have Mohs surgery (where the visible tumour and a thin layer of surrounding skin are removed) and a skin graft.' See Fig. 2.

Sarah adds: 'It was in its early stages and thankfully all further scans of lymph nodes and so on were returned negative. But I would not have persisted so much if I hadn't completed the course, especially as it had already been checked.'

Now Sarah is urging dental colleagues to invest in this online course, which she believes could make the difference between life and death for those patients who regularly attend appointments at practices across the UK whose skin cancer might otherwise go undetected.

Sarah says: 'As a dental professional, I'm very aware of the need for screening patients' head and neck area for any lumps, bumps, ulcers or any asymmetries in that region. I see my patients on a regular basis – sometimes seeing them every three months – and I notice when moles and lesions change. However, it wasn't until I started my facial aesthetics career that I became more aware of the importance of skin health.'

It was while attending a training course with dental hygienist and therapist and facial aesthetics practitioner, Annette Matthews, who is a Skcin ambassador and who lectures on the unique window of opportunity dental teams have in the respect of skincare, that Sarah was made aware of the online MASCED Pro accreditation course.

Sarah says: 'As a dental professional, taking the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy (BSDHT)-accredited MASCED Pro course has made me more aware of the signs of skin cancer and more confident talking to patients when something doesn't look right.'

Since completing the course, Sarah has also signposted other patients to get their moles checked. Most of them have found that their moles were normal, but a couple haven't, including her patient, Jane.

Lifesaving discoveries Sarah has made include advising three or four patients to have moles or lesions checked that were basal cell carcinoma, one sublingual squamous cell carcinoma and two female patients with thyroid nodules – all of whom had surgery to remove them.

Whilst the course is designed for the

Fig. 1 The patient, Jane, with the irregular mole on her nose

Fig. 2 The patient, Jane, after surgery was carried out on the mole on her nose

'Dental nurses are ideally suited to engage patients in conversations about skin cancer [and] discuss any visible moles that may look suspicious'

Sarah Breslin, a dental therapist in Kent

whole team, Sarah believes it is dental nurses in particular who are ideally suited to seize opportunities to engage patients in conversations about skin cancer, discuss any visible moles that may look suspicious and refer them on to medical colleagues.

Sarah explains: 'With a background in oral surgery at King's College for many years, I have been around a lot of patients who have undergone disfiguring treatments and required whole reconstruction of the face due to oral cancer and head and neck cancers.

'Dental nurses in particular have good rapport with patients and can engage them in what might be a life-saving conversation. From a professional point of view, we are well suited to notice changes in moles, for example, because of the proximity and regularity of dental appointments. We also have a viewpoint of patients they don't see of themselves – balding men, for example, who may have lesions on the

top of the head.

'Now is a key time to embark on this course. GPs have been so busy with COVID-19 and remotely triaging, it has made it more challenging for them to interact. Having the confidence to react means we can refer quickly. Now, because of my background, I will always discuss with my patients any lesions I don't like the look of.'

She adds: 'Confidence comes with qualification. Without this course, I may not have made that difference.'

Non-melanoma skin cancer is not just the UK's, but the world's most common cancer and the incidence of melanoma (the deadliest form of skin cancer) is rising at epidemic proportions. Yet up to 90% of cases are preventable.

Ignorance regarding how to spot the early signs and symptoms of both melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancer remains widespread amongst individuals and across professional capacities. Yet it is the only cancer we can physically see developing in its early stages – and early detection saves lives.

Skcin is a specialist skin cancer charity, founded in 2006 in memory of Karen Clifford (the 'KC' in Skcin) who lost her courageous battle to melanoma, aged 61.

The charity has a wealth of knowledge and experience in educational intervention, combined with a unique and forward-thinking approach to tackling this major public health concern. They have a suite of five national accreditation programmes, working with primary and pre-schools, employers of outdoor workers, the hair, health and beauty industry as well as allied healthcare professionals.

It has also recently launched an app that will not only support these initiatives, but revolutionise the way in which skin cancer awareness is accessed and delivered on a national scale.

The Skcin app is free and available to install on mobile devices at: app.skcin.org.

In due course, the app will be made available on the App Store and Google Play.

Special offer

Skcin have kindly offered *BDJ Team* readers a discount to sign up to the course with £10 off. Please visit the <https://pro.masced.uk> and use the code BDJ25 [offer expires on 31/12/21].

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