

Talking Ethics



Caught Between the Clock and Care: An Ethical Look at Oral Cancer Screenings

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Your appointment is running behind schedule, and your next patient is waiting. You pause and consider whether to complete a thorough oral cancer screening or move directly to instrumentation.

Situations such as this are familiar in dental hygiene practice. Many of us try to balance the realities of time and productivity with the care our patients need. Balancing time pressures with patient care is challenging in clinical practice. In a full schedule, it can be tempting to move past parts of a comprehensive assessment to save time or get caught up. However, these moments place our professional judgment under pressure and can lead to ethical distress.¹

The *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics*,¹ published by the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association (CDHA), offers a helpful lens through which to reflect on these situations. It highlights our responsibility to provide safe, patient-centred care guided by our professional knowledge and clinical judgment. Ethical distress can arise when dental hygienists feel constrained by factors outside their control that cannot be resolved in the moment.¹

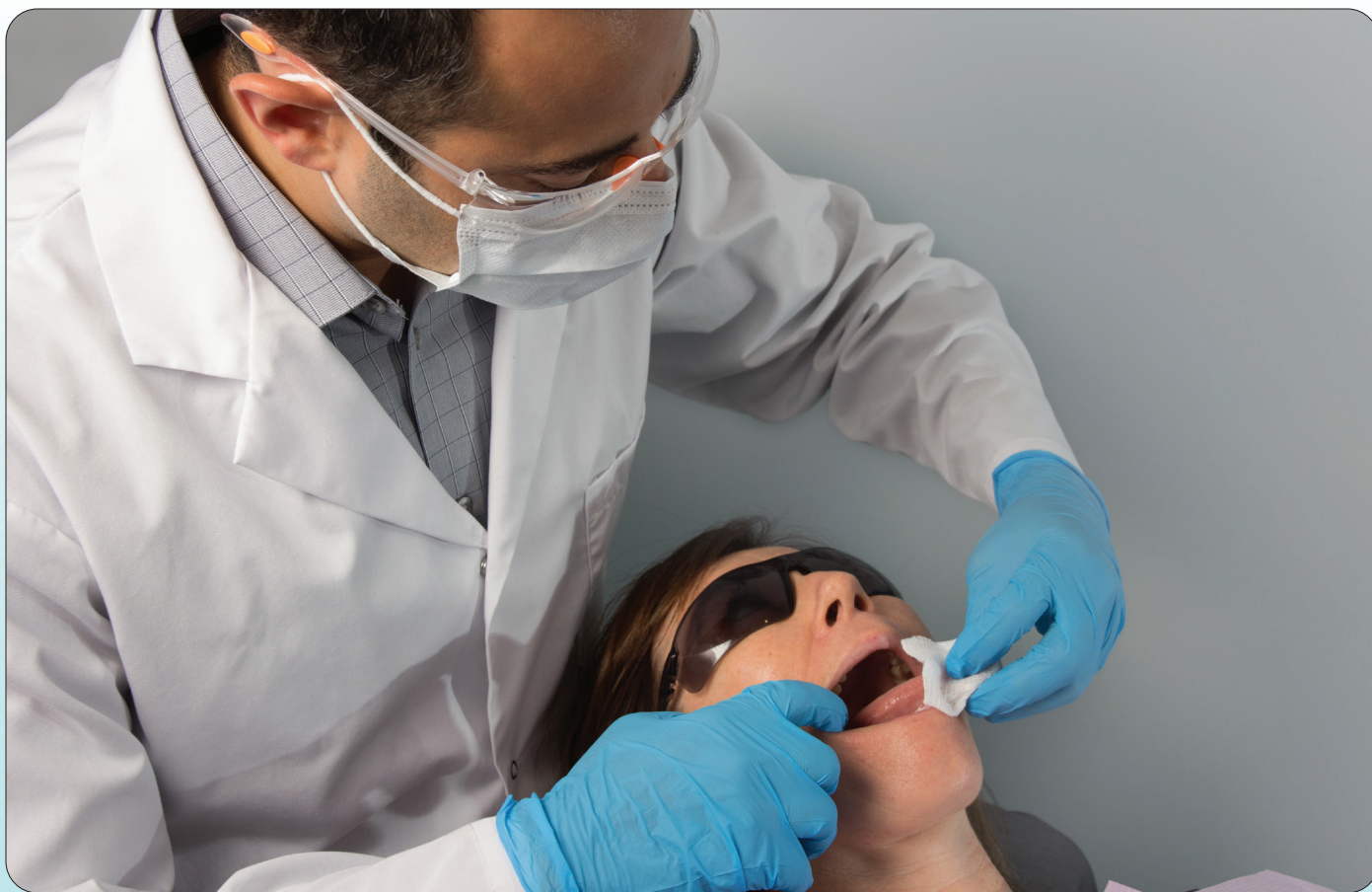
Missed oral cancer screenings and delayed identification of oral pathology remain an ongoing concern in clinical practice.^{2,3} Many lesions, as well as early-stage oral cancers, are asymptomatic.⁴ As a result, most oral carcinomas are first identified through visible changes, often described as potentially malignant disorders (PMDs), that can be detected during a visual examination.⁴ However, without these consistent screenings, early changes can go unnoticed, potentially delaying diagnosis.^{3,5} Providing routine oral cancer screenings helps support earlier detection and is consistent with the dental hygienist's role in prevention and health promotion.^{2,6}

CDHA's *Dental Hygienists' Code of Ethics* speaks to accountability, which involves taking responsibility for both actions and omissions in relation to professional standards, laws, and regulations.¹ This includes not only making clinical decisions but also recognizing how practice environments can influence the care provided. When aspects of care are omitted due to time constraints, it is worth considering the potential impact on patients. These decisions are often made in the context of competing demands and a genuine effort to meet our patients' needs. At times, accountability may involve raising concerns about appointment length and workload expectations.^{1,6}



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Caught Between the Clock...cont'd

Over time, repeated omissions can begin to shape what is accepted as routine, even when it moves away from established standards of practice.^{1,6}

With a packed schedule, it can be easy to move directly to instrumentation, but oral cancer screenings are critical for early detection and have the potential to save lives.² Taking the time to explain to patients that you are screening for oral cancer not only raises awareness of this potentially devastating disease but can also improve prognosis. These conversations provide an opportunity to discuss individual risk factors and encourage patients to watch for changes, such as red or white patches that do not resolve.⁵ Even in the busiest practice settings, completing oral cancer screenings is a professional and ethical responsibility that directly supports patients' long-term health and well-being.

References

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