More olympians screened for oral cancer

by Lisa Turner

LONDON, UK: Dentists have screened a fifth of all athletes taking part in the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada, for oral cancer. Around 800 athletes sat in the dentist’s chair during the competition, with more than 70 dentists and their assistants on hand not only to fix their teeth and mouths, but also to practice preventative dentistry. Dental Associations have welcomed the increased screening campaign that will also educate athletes on the importance of applying sun-cream to help prevent developing mouth cancers.

The decision to examine 20 per cent of all athletes in the Games has been taken by the International Olympic Committee. At the last Winter Olympics in Turin in Italy, only 10 per cent of Olympians were screened for oral cancer. Dental treatment services at sports events like the Olympics usually focuses primarily on treating infections and emergency trauma cases involving possible damage to teeth, lips, cheeks and tongues and broken bones.

Due to their training conditions, athletes tend to neglect their oral health, Dr Jack Taumont, co-chief medical officer of the Games, said. He said that they are often so nomadic they tend to put off having dental treatment at all. Some athletes in Nordic events also chew tobacco, which contains numerous carcinogens that can cause oral cancers. More danger comes from additional reflection of ultraviolet radiation off snow and ice, raising the risk of developing skin and lip cancers.

“This photo shows Tim Burke (USA) competing in the 15km biathlon relay at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Italy. Outdoor athletes like him have a higher risk of developing oral cancers. (DTM/Photo Jonathan Larsen )”

“...you have to consider they are exposed to these intense ultraviolet rays for up to 50 years, through their training and post-competitive coaching years. The skin on the lips is thin and poorly protected,” said Dr Chris Zed, associate dean of dentistry at the University of British Columbia and co-head of dental services for the 2010 Winter Games.

He added that the danger is cumulative and could lead to the development of oral cancer later in life. Outdoor athletes seem unaware of the elevated cancer risks associated with their training, according to a German study.

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Dr Stewart Harding is the Associate Director Postgraduate Dental Education Unit, Institute of Clinical Education University of Warwick and has extensive teaching experience helping many dentists towards their ultimate goal of placing implants for the benefit of their patients. He is the consultant advisor to the ‘The UK National Implant Registry’ for the British Society of Oral Implantology.

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