

## **TO SCREEN OR NOT TO SCREEN?**

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*Two dental students, Michelle and Ashley, are completing an initial examination of their patient, Mrs. Anderson. Part of their routine examination involves an oral and oropharyngeal cancer screening. During the examination, Ashley notices some inconsistencies in Michelle's oral cancer screening technique. She is not sure if she should say anything to her classmate or if she should just keep her concerns to herself. In the case described here, internal conflict resolution and ethical principles of dental care will be presented and discussed.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Michelle and Ashley are two fourth year dental students in the final semester of their pre-doctoral dental program at Southeast Atlantic State University. Neither of them have a scheduled patient and have been tasked by their clinical faculty with screening new patients for the program. Both Michelle and Ashley are slightly disappointed with this task, as they will not be able to benefit from exposure to any of the future treatment that may be required, due to their impending graduation. Fortunately, it is a Friday afternoon and there are only three patients that need to be examined. They decide together to each see one patient and then team up to see the last patient of the day.

Over the previous three and a half years, they have received multiple lectures about oral and oropharyngeal cancer. In addition to this, their dental school scheduled several teaching laboratory sessions with them so they could practice oral cancer examination techniques. Finally, both students participated in an internal rotation in their dental school's Oral Medicine Clinic. While on this rotation the students were able to actively participate in the screening, evaluation, and treatment of patients referred to the clinic for suspicious oral and oropharyngeal lesions. Thus, the students felt confident in their understanding of oral and oropharyngeal cancer as well as the diagnosis and management of patients with these lesions.

Once Michelle and Ashley were finished with the first two patients, they seated the final new patient, Mrs. Anderson, in an examination operator. They previously

decided that Michelle would complete the clinical evaluation and Ashley would document the findings digitally. Ashley completed the medical and health questionnaire which revealed Mrs. Anderson has been a one-pack a day cigarette smoker for nearly thirty years and consumed roughly twenty alcoholic beverages per week.

After updating all of Mrs. Anderson's paperwork, Ashley watched as Michelle began the oral cancer screening.

"Extra-oral findings within normal limits. All right Mrs. Anderson, go ahead and open for me", Michelle said.

Michelle placed a piece of gauze on Mrs. Anderson's tongue and briefly moved it from side to side and then removed the gauze. "OCS negative. Let's do the periodontal charting", she said.

Ashley could hardly believe how quick Michelle's intraoral examination had been. She remembered how her clinical faculty has spent several hours teaching them the proper way to complete OCS and Michelle's attempt was definitely inadequate. *She didn't even look at her throat!*

*But should I even say anything?* Ashley was conflicted on whether or not to voice her concerns to Michelle. They had the same training and after all, they would be in private practice soon so Michelle should know what an adequate OCS entailed. Michelle was also one of her best friends in school, so she did not want to cause any strain on their relationship. After briefly mulling over her options, she decided she would say something to Michelle when she had the chance.

"Let's look at the radiographs together Ash", said Michelle.

Right on cue, Michelle presented the perfect opportunity for Ashley to discreetly raise the issue by rolling in her chair to the computer where Ashley was sitting so they could examine the radiographs.

"Come on Michelle", Ashley said in a low voice. "If you're going to do the screening, you might as well do it right", she said half sarcastically and half seriously.

Michelle looked sheepishly at Ashley, "Alright, you're right. Let's take another look."

After the pair reviewed Mrs. Anderson's dental radiographs, Michelle returned to the patient. She positioned the dental mirror into Mrs. Anderson's mouth and depressed her tongue. Michelle said, "Go ahead and say 'Ah' for me".

Michelle looked into Mrs. Anderson's throat and then turned her head to Ashley, "Hey, can you take a look at this?"

Ashley washed her hands and donned some examination gloves. As she moved towards Mrs. Anderson she said, "Oh, did you find something?"

Ashley answered, "Sometimes it's just helpful to have another set of eyes." Ashley looked into Mrs. Anderson's throat while Michelle continued retracting her tongue. She could see a red and white ulcerated mass at the back left side of Mrs. Anderson's throat. "There appears to be something that looks suspicious, but it could just be tonsillitis Mrs. Anderson. Is it OK if we call one of our faculty over to look at it?"