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A pilot study to determine the accuracy of mouth self-examination in a high risk population

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Background and relevance to cancer: Oral cancer has a 5-year survival rate of up to 90% when lesions are less than 2cm in size. However, up to half of patients present with advanced lesions when 5-year survival rates are as low as 20%. Thus, it is important to determine successful methods of encouraging early presentation. As virtually all oral cancers are preceded by visible changes in the oral mucosa, visual inspection of the mouth has a key role to play for its early detection. However, there is little information and research on self-screening for oral cancer.

Aims: The intention of the proposed project is to conduct two pilot studies with individuals who are at risk of developing oral cancer (the target group) to determine whether they are able to accurately learn and perform mouth self-examination. The outcome of these studies will inform the content of an intervention for the early detection of oral cancer.

Outline plan of research and nature of collaboration: A randomised trial will be used to determine whether it is feasible to teach the target group mouth self-examination via written information and one-to-one instruction (Study 1). A second randomized trial (Study 2) will then involve a testing whether the procedure of mouth self-examination will allow the target group to correctly locate and observe potentially malignant changes in the oral mucosa (e.g. a red or white patch) of which they were previously unaware. This collaborative research will bring together departments of health psychology, oral surgery and dentistry. The innovative pilot studies will build and strengthen ties between these disciplines, enabling future collaboration towards the early detection of oral cancer.