

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## Virtual Awareness Programme (VAP) –Way to curb the tobacco menace and Oral cancer?

Dear Editor,

Cancer has emerged as a major public health problem in developing countries. Oral cancer is the 1st most common cancer among men and 2nd most common cancer among women in India.<sup>1,2</sup> Despite advances in the diagnosis and treatment of oral cancer, the proportion of oral cancer cases diagnosed at an early and localized stage and survival rate is still below 50%. It has been reported that lack of public knowledge and awareness with regard to its prevention associated with the known risk factors and early identification of the localised disease or the disease even in its premalignant state attribute to its poor outcome.<sup>3</sup>

Tobacco use is a major risk factor for many chronic diseases, including cancer. Worldwide it accounts for nearly 1.35 million deaths every year. India is the second largest consumer and producer of tobacco. It leads not only to loss of lives, but also impacts the country with socio-economic burden. According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey, 2016-17, nearly 267 million 15 years and above adults (29% of all adults) in India are tobacco users. Thus, tobacco consumption remains the most important avoidable cancer risk.<sup>4,5</sup>

According to the World Cancer Report, the proposed steep increase in cancer cases in the coming years is mainly be due to current trends in smoking prevalence and the growing adoption of unhealthy lifestyles. Report also provides clear evidence that healthy lifestyles and public health action by governments and health practitioners could curb this trend, and prevent as many as one third of cancers worldwide. Epidemiological evidence supports that the greatest reduction in the number of cancer deaths within the next several decades will be due to those who stop the habit and the greatest effect would result from stopping smoking in the early 30s. Hence, cancer control strategies emphasise on the establishment of comprehensive national cancer control programmes, aimed at reducing the incidence of the disease, particularly in developing countries, where a large proportion of cancers are detected late in the course of the disease. Therefore, efforts towards increasing awareness and achieving earlier diagnosis deserve urgent attention.<sup>5</sup>

The Covid pandemic has forced us to use virtual platform for all kinds of communications and has provided an opportunity for the development of more flexible learning solutions that make better use of distance learning and digital solutions. The present-day education has become totally virtual, with all the teachers and students well adapting to this new mode of teaching and learning. As the current mode of education is virtual, it will be easier to

access the students through this mode. All the students will have digital appliances required for virtual learning and they would have mastered this mode of learning.

Hence, the need of the hour is to use the virtual platform for mass health education of the vulnerable population of the society at community level, with the aim to prevent incidence and progression of oral cancer. It can be a good media for health education on trivial issues such as tobacco and oral cancer among students. Present youth are highly vulnerable to tobacco addiction. Though there are sufficient laws and regulations to curb tobacco menace especially among youth, their effectiveness is questionable. Hence, Virtual Awareness Programme (VAP) can be utilised to educate the students regarding the ill effects of tobacco use, risk factors, appearance and prevention of cancer, significance of healthy lifestyle and mouth self-examination for early detection of cancer. Their young minds with good assimilative capabilities can be taught about the preventive measures to be followed, counselled and made aware of their social responsibilities and duties. Further by educating them, they can be used as future resource personnel to educate others. This definitely would be a better mode at bringing positive socio-behavioural changes, as such informed children can be agents of change for their family, community and beyond.

VAP can be made interesting by creative and innovative improvisation of technology. For instance, cartoons/animation/ short information videos can be contrived to provide information to children on ill effects of tobacco, oral cancer development and early self-examination and identification of the lesions. This would not only protect themselves by altering their attitude and behaviour, but also protect their friends and community by word of mouth spread of information. Additionally, the information pamphlets could come handy for the teachers in sensitising the students<sup>6</sup>. For best results, experimental research should be done using VAP to a smaller cohort, before adapting to a larger population. Such mass health education VAP programmes on tobacco and oral cancer can definitely bring positive change, causing reduction and cessation of tobacco consumption and following healthy lifestyle and diet.

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**How to cite this article:** Sreeshyla HS, Jaishankar HP, Hegde U, Shashidara R. Virtual awareness programme (VAP) –way to curb the tobacco menace and oral cancer? Oral Maxillofac Pathol J 2023;14(1): page no. 1-2

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