

# Comment on: A survey on oral health-related standard of care for head and neck cancer patients in the EU

Dear Editor,

Congratulations to Bertl and colleagues for their research on a vital matter that dramatically affects the wellbeing of individuals undergoing head and neck cancer treatment (Bertl et al., 2023). Their study endeavors to pinpoint the usual procedures for evaluating and handling the oral cavity before commencing head and neck cancer (HNC) treatment. Furthermore, the research delves into identifying preventive measures concerning oral health. The researchers reached out to 690 medical centers throughout the European Union, out of which 87 centers responded. Their survey consisted of 19 questions primarily focused on the team/department structure, planning HNC treatments, and assessing and addressing dental treatment requirements before initiating treatment. Sadly, their results revealed that only 25% of dental professionals are included in interdisciplinary treatment planning. However, their inclusion and offering of dental treatment within the same facility improves oral health-related standards of care. The authors further stress that significant variance exists in the standard of care for dental evaluation and preventive dentistry routines, including recording the orthopantomogram, delivering dental treatment, and providing radiation protection splints and fluoride application splints across the different European regions. These findings highlight the urgent need for multidisciplinary efforts to settle care standards for such patients. Although the result of the current study provides an essential perspective on real-world treatment planning and dental management protocols in HNC patients, we would like to contribute to this topic of supreme importance for dental and head and neck oncology disciplines, which could enhance efforts toward global unified care standards.

The authors deliberately decided not to include questions about the details of radiotherapy (RT) or the occurrence of osteoradionecrosis (ORN) in the 19-question survey. The incidence of radiation-induced trismus (RIT) and ORN varies widely across studies, with rates ranging from 5% to 65% for RIT and from 4% to 20% for ORN, depending on the location and stage of the treated tumor, whether teeth were extracted, the involvement of the jaws and masticatory system in surgery, and the total radiation dosages and doses received by the jaws and masticatory apparatus (Kubota et al., 2021; van der Geer et al., 2019). Hence, significant proportions of HNC patients treated with RT or chemo-RT unavoidably suffer from severe late complications, such as RIT and ORN, which adversely affect

their quality of life (Topkan et al., 2023). ORN may cause unpleasant symptoms, including difficulty swallowing, reduced physical function, trismus, problems with teeth and gums, dry mouth, halitosis, and otologic problems. RIT, on the contrary, can lead to speech and eating disorders and challenges in maintaining an open airway during emergencies (Chieng et al., 2021). Hence, orthopantomograms and dosimetric results must be recorded to ensure the best possible patient care during and after the oncological treatment of HNC patients. Such strategies may enable us to promptly diagnose existing or potential ORN, trismus, and RIT rather than focusing only on the relatively more easily manageable dental infection foci and radiation caries. This proactive approach to patient care is vital to promoting positive outcomes and improving overall quality of life.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Efsun Somay:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; visualization; validation; methodology; software; formal analysis; project administration; resources; supervision; data curation. **Erkan Topkan:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; visualization; validation; methodology; software; formal analysis; project administration; resources; supervision; data curation. **Ugur Selekc:** Writing – original draft; investigation; conceptualization; methodology; validation; visualization; writing – review and editing; project administration; formal analysis; software; data curation; supervision; resources.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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