More Olympians screened for oral cancer

LONDON, UK: Dentists have screened a fifth of all athletes taking part in the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver in 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 to practise preventative dentistry in addition to fixing teeth and mouths. Dental associations have welcomed the increased screening campaign that will also educate athletes on the importance of applying sun-cream to help prevent mouth cancers.

The decision to examine 20 per cent of all athletes in the Games was 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 focus primarily on treating infections and emergency trauma cases involving possible damage to teeth, lips, cheeks and tongues, and broken bones.

Owing to their training conditions, athletes tend to neglect their oral health, according to Dr Jack Taunton, Co-chief Medical Officer of the Games. He said that they are so nomadic they tend to postpone dental treatment. Some athletes in Nordic events also chew tobacco, which contains numerous carcinogens that can cause oral cancers. In addition, the reflection of ultraviolet radiation off snow and ice increases the risk of developing skin and lip cancers.

“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.

Genes control early tooth development

Several genes affect tooth development in the first year of life, according to the findings of a study conducted at the Imperial College London, the University of Bristol (both in the UK) and the University of Oulu in Finland. The research found that the teeth of babies with certain genetic variants tend to appear later and that these children have a lower number of teeth by the age of one. In addition, those children whose teeth develop later have a 35 per cent increased likelihood of requiring orthodontic treatment.

Some of the genes identified have been linked in previous studies with the development of the skull, jaws, ears, fingers, toes, and heart. The discovery may lead to innovations in the early treatment and prevention of congenital dental and occlusion problems.

Malaysia surveys oral health

The Ministry of Health in Malaysia has started a new nationwide campaign to determine the oral health conditions and dental treatment needs of more than 14,000 adults. The last surveys published in 2000 found that more than 50 per cent of people had not made a dental visit in the previous two years.