

Terminology on oral potentially malignant disorders in European languages: An appraisal

To disseminate knowledge to European healthcare professionals on the topic of oral potentially malignant disorders (OPMD), a pan-European consortium of experts has developed OPMD Healthcare Professional Training (www.OPMDcare.com), a project co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union (2020–2022). The main aim of this project was to provide an updated guidance to clinicians who manage patients with OPMDs involving the oral cavity, to allow them to recognise, investigate, diagnose and manage these conditions. The project was constructed in an innovative way by using multiple e-learning tools and bringing case experience from different Oral Medicine units through the respective universities of the partners involved [King's College London (United Kingdom), Bordeaux University (France), Santiago de Compostela University (Spain), Milan University (Italy), Zagreb University (Croatia) and Cespu University (Portugal)].

The nomenclature, classification and the definition of OPMD was proposed by Warnakulasuriya at the 2005 WHO Collaborative Centre for Oral Cancer Workshop, and updated at the Glasgow 2020 Workshop. OPMDs are a heterogeneous group of lesions, diseases, and conditions, where their clinical presentations may precede the diagnosis of oral squamous cell carcinoma (Warnakulasuriya, 2020; Warnakulasuriya et al., 2007, 2021). Following these WHO recommendations, the terms “potentially malignant” became more favoured than the terms “precancerous” or “pre-malignant” to indicate patients having these mucosal abnormalities are at risk of developing an oral cancer, but not necessarily. Another important change to the definition was combining “lesions” and “conditions” as proposed in the 1977 WHO classification (Kramer et al., 1978) into one category of “disorders,” where oral cancers could be detected more frequently than expected in the oral cavity of patients with any of these high-risk oral mucosal disorders. This definition recognises the fact that environmental carcinogens such as tobacco, alcohol and betel quid may affect any part of the lining mucosa of the upper aerodigestive tract and the presence of these disorders could indicate the potential of having an increased risk of the patient having an oral cancer elsewhere in the mouth during the course of their life-time (Johnson, 2020). At the Glasgow 2020 Workshop, it was also discussed (although without consensus of the group) that not only the disorder itself but also genomic and other molecular abnormalities in oral mucosa may promote the existence of an OPMD and potentially an oral cancer (Monteiro et al., 2021; Warnakulasuriya & Lodi, 2021). For example, patients with a leukoplakia are at risk of having a malignancy that may arise elsewhere in the oral cavity as a result of field

change (field cancerisation), even at sites previously thought to have the appearance of apparently clinically normal mucosa over their lifetime (Speight et al., 2018; Warnakulasuriya et al., 2021).

Although there is a good consensus regarding the definition of OPMDs in the English language as noted in the high citation index of the 2007 WHO Collaborating Centre publication (Warnakulasuriya et al., 2007), we observed a surprising heterogeneity in the translation of the word “disorder” in terminology among different native languages across European countries. Indeed, because of difficulties in direct translation, many are still using old terminologies in their native language such as “lesion,” “disease,” or “condition” when translating the word “disorder.”

Translation of OPMD into other European languages has been challenging. As an example, the word “disorder” translated to Portuguese word “*desordem*” means lack of order; confusion; or fight (*Dicionário da língua portuguesa*, 2018). Unfortunately, because of this discrepancy, many of the OPMD translations in Portuguese still include the word “lesion.” Although many oral medicine clinicians use the word “lesion” when trying to designate “disorder,” this could be confusing for general health professionals as it contradicts the OPMD concept previously proposed. In view of this, and after evaluating other synonyms (including *doença*, *desordens*, *distúrbios*, *trastornos*, *ou afecções* and others), we propose the use of the Portuguese word “*alterações*” for the close translation of “disorder” resulting in “*Alterações orais potencialmente malignas*.” In Portuguese, “*alterações*” means modification, changes, disturbance (*Dicionário da língua portuguesa*, 2018) and together with the words “potentially malignant” we feel this would convey a similar meaning of OPMD in the English language.

This translation issue exists also in Spain and has been reported by Aguirre-Urizar and Mosqueda-Taylor (2016) where the word “*desorden*” in Spanish language is not recognised. The authors suggested an alternative term “*trastorno*,” with a variable meaning to include: (1) action and effect to modify the permanent features of something or the development of a process and (2) to alter the normal functioning of something or the activity of someone. Thus, their proposal was to translate “oral potentially malignant disorders” (OPMD) to “TOPM” in Spanish—namely as “*trastornos orales potencialmente malignos*.”

The word “disorder” also poses translational challenges in French. The Larousse dictionary defines disorder in several ways, depending on the context and if singular or plural—a complexity in the French language. In the singular, the term “disorder” can have four different meanings: (1) a state of agitation, worry, confusion, (2) emotion of

love, (3) disturbance in the performance of a physical or psychological function, which may be manifested at the level of an apparatus, an organ or a tissue, and (4) alteration in relationships between people; state of agitation, disarray. In the plural form, it may mean serious social unrest or fine materials transported in suspension by a river. The most commonly used term to translate “disorders” in this context is “lesions.” However, the more accurate term is “affection,” which means a pathological modification of the organism. We, therefore, propose to translate Oral Potentially Malignant Disorders to French as “*Affections orales à Potentiel Malin*.” A slightly different translation was proposed by Ben Slama as “*Affections potentiellement malignes de la muqueuse buccale*” which means a disorder that may eventually become transformed to be a cancer (Ben Slama, 2010).

In Italian, as for other European languages, the noun “*disordine*” has many meanings, the main being lack of order or organisation, a state of confusion, which can be used in many circumstances to describe a material situation, as well as in a figurative way. However, the term is used in medicine too, especially in psychiatry and psychology, as for the English expression “mental disorders.” Since 2005, “*disordini orali potenzialmente maligni*,” has been largely adopted by the majority of oral medicine and oral pathology specialists, although among general dental practitioners, especially those who graduated in the 2010s or prior, the expression “*lesione pre-maligna/precancerosa*” remains very popular.

In Croatia, the translation of OPMD is “*oralni potencijalno zloćudni pomećečaji*.” The word “*pomećečaji*” in Croatian language means “disturbance of regularity, order or function of something” (Croatian Linguistic Portal <https://hjp.znanje.hr/index.php?show=search>) and is a Croatian word for “disorder.” The word is commonly used in the medical context. From the semantic and lexical point of view, the translation of OPMD to Croatian language does not pose a challenge. What might be challenging is the adoption of the new terminology among healthcare professionals since “lesion” is a term commonly used for morphological abnormalities of oral (and other) mucosa. Since OPMDs are an issue more complex than just altered mucosal morphology (Warnakulasuriya et al., 2021), our task will be to educate healthcare professionals on the natural history of OPMD (i.e., not all OPMD's may transform to cancer during the lifetime of a patient). Our Erasmus project provides an ideal platform to do so.

This is an important issue as the project translates information on the topic of OPMDs across several platforms, in different European languages. We will use the abovementioned definitions (Table 1), with the respective translation for each language (Portuguese, Spanish,

French, Italian, and Croatian) based on the opinion of each Erasmus project partner, whilst also taking into account the opinions of language experts and oral medicine professionals from each country.

There is a need for consensus in each country for the translation of definitions to avoid confusion and misunderstanding with regards to the nomenclature of OPMDs. In addition, when possible, the English version “oral potentially malignant disorders” should appear in the beginning of translated texts (including key-words//MESH words) during any translation of the word “disorder” and OPMDs to other European languages. This will prevent further confusion relating to original definition of OPMDs.

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TABLE 1 Recommended OPMD translation terms for each European country language

Country language	OPMD translated term
Portuguese	<i>Alterações orais potencialmente malignas</i>
Spanish	<i>Trastornos orales potencialmente malignos</i>
French	<i>Affections orales à Potentiel Malin</i>
Italian	<i>Disordini orali potenzialmente maligni</i>
Croatian	<i>Oralni potencijalno zloćudni pomećečaji</i>

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