

Skin cancer – Australia's lethal legacy

“One in two Australians will develop this deadly disease”

When I was four-years-old I used to pat talcum powder over my olive skin, trying to achieve what I hoped was an aristocratic look.

The influencing factor was seeing fair skinned fairy princesses in Hans Christian Anderson's Illustrated Works.

These days however, the influencing aristocracy are heiresses like Paris Hilton, who offer tandoori coloured limbs as a paradigm for attractiveness. Caramel skin, once considered the leathery trademark of the working



class, now colours the quest of the modern princess.

The tan flourished in the seventies and eighties; think vintage images like Elle McPherson basking up the 'goodness' of the Aussie sun in the 80s.

Yet ferociously, this quintessential aspect of our culture has turned against us,

like an auto immune disease attacking itself.

Australia holds the dire title of the highest skin cancer rate in the world. It's not a playful boast either; one in two Australians will develop this deadly disease.

This is shocking enough, but I find these figures particularly startling. Four

years ago, when I first started researching this topic, the statistic was one in three. What's scary is how this rate has progressed so rapidly.

However, while the risk of skin cancer should be taken seriously, it is comforting to know that, it can be prevented by playing it safe in the sun.

Essentially, it's not just 'sunlight' that is deadly but ultraviolet (UV) rays transmitted from sunlight or a solarium that is harmful. Insidiously, UV rays can burn someone even when they're sitting in the shade as it can reflect off surfaces like water or sand. Over-exposure to UV rays decreases the ability of the immune system to recognise and attack newly formed skin cancer cells, which can allow them to grow easier.

The risk of developing skin cancer is related to the amount of UV radiation that one is exposed to over their lifetime, particularly in childhood. There are other influencing factors as well, including: people who don't tan but go red in the sun, those with freckles, anyone with a family history of skin cancer, people who work outside for long periods of time and of course, those

who use solariums. SunSmart has been forced to examine its popular mantra of Slip Slop Slap, adding further instruction- Seek and Slide. That is, seeking shade and sliding on sunglasses.

Skin cancer is a deadly disease that is rampant in Australia. Melanoma, potentially fatal if left unnoticed, claims the lives of at least 1600 Australians every year. That's about the size of a small country town. Yet the good news about this form of cancer is that while it's preventable, it's also one of the few cancers that is completely treatable if discovered early enough. Check moles regularly, looking for any change or growth. See a doctor if worried. ☒

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