Skin cancer screening of outdoor workers in Queensland

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To the Editor: The Australian state of Queensland has one of the highest rates of melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancer in the world.[1,2] Solar ultraviolet (UV) radiation is the most important environmental risk factor,[3] highlighting the need for sun safety education and skin cancer screening among outdoor workers in Queensland. Many such programs are currently in place, including the Sunsafe Workplace Program developed by the University of Queensland in collaboration with the Queensland Skin and Cancer Foundation in 2007.

In August 2010, we attended an outdoor workplace in Brisbane, with extensive sun safety policies already in place, to perform free voluntary skin checks on employees. Of 55 people invited to participate, 39 accepted. Of these, 36 were male, the median age was 35 years (range, 19–62 years), and 28 were of British and/or Irish ancestry. Eighteen participants reported spending 5–8 hours a day outdoors mid week and 20 reported the same at weekends. Six reported that at the start of summer, they never tanned and always burned, and 31 reported burning first, then tanning. Nearly half reported having had more than five painful sunburns in their lifetime. Despite these results, only a third of participants (13) reported wearing sunscreen, less than half (17) reported wearing a hat, and two-thirds (26) reported wearing sunglasses more than 50% of the time.

Of the 39 participants, we referred one to his general practitioner for management of two non-melanoma skin cancers. About half of the participants reported having had formal skin checks before. Of these, one had previously had melanoma and five had non-melanoma skin cancers, and 10 had one or more suspicious naevi removed in their lifetimes. The main reasons given for not having had a previous skin examination were fear of skin cancer diagnosis and difficulty attending appointments during working hours. We found that providing easy access to free on-site skin examinations reduced interference to the work day, made appointments more accessible (both physically and financially), and enabled us to provide personalised infor-

mation about participants' skin and skin cancer risks and reassure those who had been anxious about receiving skin cancer diagnoses. We found that workers were relieved when told they had nothing suspicious presenting on the day, and that they seemed less anxious about seeking skin checks in the future.

Despite many public awareness campaigns on skin cancer and the establishment of sun safety programs in the workplace, we found there is still room for improvement. Although clinical guidelines do not currently recommend routine skin cancer screening for the general population,[4] the success of our visit leads us to encourage workplaces that are exposed to solar UV radiation to consider providing on-site skin examinations for employees, as well as ongoing sun safety education. We believe such services can help to break down barriers that prevent people from seeking medical assessment and management, and can help to spread the safety-in-the-sun message.

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