Will the solarium ban prevent skin cancer?

March 11 2014

Dr Ivanka Prichard

With the ban on commercial solariums coming into force this year, Flinders University's Dr Ivanka Prichard is questioning whether the new law will actually reduce skin cancer rates or simply lead to more outdoor sun exposure.

Dr Prichard, a lecturer in Social Health Sciences, is now undertaking a study to determine how solarium users will act post-ban. The research will also compare the general tanning beliefs and behaviours of tanners

with non-tanners, including peoples' reasons for tanning, the amount of time they spend tanning, whether they use sun protection and their level of skin tone satisfaction.

In 2012 the South Australian, New South Wales and Victorian governments announced a total ban on commercial solaria tanning units, effective from December 31, 2014.

While research suggests the eradication of sunbeds from Australia will lead to significant reductions in skin cancer rates, Dr Prichard said legislative interventions in general produce small to moderate results in modifying health behaviours.

"The idea is that by banning solariums people won't be able to tan as much, resulting in reduced incidence of skin cancer, but the reality of that remains to be seen because we don't yet know how the ban will modify ultraviolet (UV) exposure of prior solarium users," Dr Prichard said.

"Our previous studies have told us that appearance is a strong motivator for people to tan so we have to question whether people will simply replace solarium use with more time in the sun, which will have little impact on Australia's skin cancer rates," she said.

"Solarium users will either stop tanning altogether, which is obviously ideal from a public health perspective, turn to fake tanning products, which would also reduce the cancer risk, or increase outdoor sun exposure to maintain their tanned appearance.

"With these possible outcomes, it is critical we examine any unintended consequences to determine whether additional public health campaigns are needed to ensure the intended purpose of the ban, to reduce skin cancer incidence, is met."

The study will monitor current sun exposure of solarium and non-solarium users as well as their intended use post-ban, and the immediate and long-term changes in sun exposure as a result of the ban.

Dr Prichard said the link between skin cancer and UV radiation from the sun and solarium is well established, with solarium use particularly associated with a significant increase in melanoma risk.

"Australia has the highest incidence of skin cancer in the world and melanoma is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in young people.

"Skin cancer is also one of the most preventable cancers so our governments have gone down the sensible route of banning solariums, but will it be effective enough to prevent skin cancer long term?"

Provided by Flinders University

Citation: Will the solarium ban prevent skin cancer? (2014, March 11) retrieved 23 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-solarium-skin-cancer.html

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