

Saving your skin: New pigmented lesion program monitors people at high risk of dermatological cancer

April 1 2010, Tom Vasich



Excessive sun exposure can trigger the growth of cancerous skin lesions. The most serious of these are melanomas, estimated to have killed 8,650 people in the U.S. last year

(PhysOrg.com) -- Each year, millions of Americans develop cancerous skin lesions. The vast majority of these are easily treated and highly survivable, but some are — or could become — melanomas, which can be aggressive and potentially deadly.

The causes of skin cancer vary, ranging from excessive sun exposure to family genetics. People who have numerous moles or compromised immune systems — as seen with [organ transplantation](#) and HIV/AIDS — are also more susceptible.

At UC Irvine Medical Center’s Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, dermatologists, surgeons, oncologists and pathologists have created a pigmented lesion program for at-risk patients. Part of the Chao facility’s Melanoma Center, it’s the first in Orange County to encompass research, training and patient care related to suspicious lesions and moles.

“Generally, it’s difficult for people at high risk of skin cancer to receive comprehensive care,” says Dr. Janelen Smith, a UCI dermatologist and program co-director. “Our team has many years of expertise, knowing which moles and lesions need to be treated and which need to be left alone. We watch them pretty carefully.”

Among the sophisticated equipment utilized to do this is a SIAScope, one of the most advanced melanoma imaging systems in the world. UC Irvine Medical Center is the only medical facility in California currently using the device for melanoma detection, according to Dr. James Jakowatz, UCI surgical oncologist and Melanoma Center director.

The noninvasive SIAScope records the pathological pattern of each mole. Subsequent scans flag pattern changes, letting doctors monitor multiple lesions simultaneously.

“For patients with many moles, this computer imaging can make a big difference,” Smith says. “It decreases the number of biopsies needed, so they won’t look like a pincushion.”

“This is essential for people who have lots of atypical moles,” says Dr. Kenneth Linden, UCI dermatologist and program co-director. “It helps with overall management of melanoma risk.”

And that risk continues to grow. Melanoma was diagnosed in about 68,000 Americans last year, Smith says, and the percentage of people

who develop it has more than doubled in the past three decades.

If not treated early, melanoma can turn deadly. Its cells penetrate more deeply into the skin and can enter the bloodstream and lymph node channels, dispersing cancer throughout the body. According to Linden, one person dies of melanoma every hour in the U.S.

“We believe our comprehensive program is vital to keeping on top of [melanoma](#) risk,” he says. “We want to see patients with precursors to this form of [skin cancer](#) and catch it before it spreads.”

In addition to caring for patients, doctors with the pigmented lesion program conduct research and host clinical trials of promising new treatments. The program also sponsors monthly multidisciplinary conferences for area internists, oncologists, dermatologists, radiologists and family medicine physicians to discuss the latest advances in the field.

More information: For more information about the program or to request a consultation, call 714-456-8171.

Provided by UC Irvine

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