

Sunburnt Australia to pull plug on sunbed tans

February 19 2012, by Madeleine Coorey

Jay Allen used to love having what he thought was a healthy tan -- so much so that he would regularly expose his body to the lights of a sunbed to ensure he maintained his overall colour.

But after one session he noticed a small mole on his ankle was bleeding and at his wife's insistence, he went to the doctor. He was told he had a skin cancer which could kill him if he didn't have it removed.

"I thought it was a good thing," he said of using a solarium. "I thought it was going to be safer in the [sunbed](#) than laying out in the sun for an hour. It turns out it nearly cost me my life."

Australia is known as the sunburnt country, where beaches are thronged with bathers basking in the sun and the rates of melanoma, a potentially fatal form of skin cancer, are the highest in the world.

For decades public health campaigns have urged people to wear sunscreen, hats and sunglasses and avoid the sun during the hottest part of the day, but now they say even tanning on a sunbed is not safe and must be banned.

The country's most populous state [New South Wales](#) has taken the strongest line so far, saying commercial solariums will become illegal in three years, given mounting evidence that the use of sunbeds is linked to increased melanoma risk.

Recent research suggests that the use of sunbeds by people aged 18 to 39 increases their risk of developing melanoma, the most common form of cancer among young Australians, by an average of 41 percent.

The main cause of skin cancer is exposure to UV radiation, from the sun and other sources such as sunbeds, in genetically predisposed people, with more than 1,200 people dying from the disease here each year.

Allen can't prove that using a sunbed an estimated 30 times between 2004 to 2007 resulted in his [cancer diagnosis](#), but he's convinced there's a link.

"My surgeon is adamant that my sunbed use contributed to my disease," said the 36-year-old, who has had the mole removed, along with [lymph nodes](#) in his groin, where it had spread, and undergone chemotherapy.

"There was no warnings, no one told me they were bad for me. So I just did what you do when you're young you don't worry about the risks involved."

Ian Olver from the Cancer Council of Australia said it was a myth that sunbeds were a safe way to tan, adding that they were capable of delivering more energy -- up to five times more -- than the midday sun in summer.

"The fact is, it's UV light, and if you absorb enough UV light to turn your skin brown then you've actually done enough damage to trigger not only [skin cancer](#), but premature ageing later on," he said.

"There isn't a safe form of tanning by UV light."

Olver said while there were medical uses for UV treatment, you do not get the benefits when you damage the skin.

"There is no reason for sunbeds to exist. Tanning is a fashion, it's not healthy," he said.

Robyn Sweeney, who runs a solarium in the Sydney suburb of Dee Why, agrees there is an element of vanity to sunbeds.

But she says many of her customers have medical conditions such as skin disease, depression, and vitamin D deficiency, which benefit from the rays.

She does not believe that a few minutes in a sunbed could be harmful if the client is assessed properly and not given too high a dose.

"I don't see it as that bad for you and I think the main issue is burning and you don't burn in a [solarium](#)," she told AFP, adding that her daughter often uses a sunbed.

As long as Australians are allowed to smoke tobacco, eat junk food and drink alcohol, Sweeney says, they should be allowed to have an occasional sunbed.

"Personally, I wouldn't work in one if I thought it was bad," she said.

One of her best customers, 20-year-old bartender Lucinda Earlam, agrees.

"I try to use a bed at least once a week," she said at Sweeney's salon where warning signs about harmful [UV radiation](#) are posted, adding that she was not worried about the prospect of developing a [melanoma](#).

"What worries me more is getting sunburned at the beach."

Allen hopes that banning sunbeds in New South Wales, Australia's most

populous state, will send a clear message that there is no place for indoor tanning.

"Just be pale. You don't have to get that tanned look, it's not that important," he said.

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Citation: Sunburnt Australia to pull plug on sunbed tans (2012, February 19) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-sunburnt-australia-sunbed-tans.html>

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