

Skin cancer bill to skyrocket by 2015, Australian study finds

November 19 2012, by Sunanda Creagh



Over 55s made up the bulk of people seeking treatment for skin cancer in 2010, the study said. Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/redkoala1>

Taxpayers will be spending over \$700m annually to treat Australia's most common skin cancers by the year 2015, with over-65s making up the bulk of patients, a new study has found.

Non-[melanoma](#) skin cancers, which include [basal cell carcinoma](#) (BCC) and [squamous cell carcinoma](#) (SCC), are less deadly but more common than melanoma skin cancers and make up the majority of cancer cases in Australia.

So vast is the number of people needing non-melanoma skin cancers cut out, cancer registries would be overloaded if they collected data on them, said the study's lead author, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne dermatologist Professor Rodney Sinclair.

Instead, the authors of the study researched data from the Medicare Benefits Schedule to assess the current and future scale of the problem. Their results are published in the [Medical Journal of Australia](#) today.

The team found that treatment for non-melanoma skin cancers soared 86% between 1997 and 2010 and is on track to rise by a further 22% between 2010 and 2015. Skin cancers are more likely to appear in older people and the [ageing population](#) will place extra pressure on medical infrastructure in coming years, the study found.

The cost jumped from \$264 million in 2001 to \$511 million in 2010, is projected to cost \$703 million to the public [health bill](#) by 2015.

"That's the cost to government. The cost to patients, the out of pocket expense, will be at least 30% or 40% more from that," said Prof Sinclair, adding that the figures didn't include loss in productivity caused by time off work.

"It's totally reinforced our clinical impression, which was that we are seeing a lot more skin cancer out in the community," said Prof Sinclair, adding that some sufferers of non-melanoma skin cancers need 30 cut out every year.

Prof Sinclair said projecting the future cost of the problem allowed authorities to plan enough medical infrastructure to deal with the problem.

In 2010, 83% of the 767,347 non-melanoma skin cancer treatments needed were for over-55s, while in 2015 it's expected that more than 630,000 of the 900,000 treatments needed will be for over-65s.

Bruce Armstrong, professor of public health at the University of Sydney, said it was an important study that underscored the gravity of the skin cancer problem in Australia.

"This is real. It's an extremely important cancer and we are still not doing anywhere near enough to deal with it," he said, calling for increased spending on public shade cloths on streets and near sports grounds.

"This research shows that investment can be repaid rather quickly by savings on the cost of treatments," said Prof Armstrong, who was not involved in the study.

He said the latest [NSW Skin Cancer Prevention Strategy](#), released last week, outlined some good measures for reducing the incidence of [skin cancer](#).

People should apply sunscreen often and ensure that using it doesn't embolden them to stay out in the sun longer than they otherwise would, he said.

Ian Olver, Clinical Professor of Oncology at Cancer Council Australia said the scale of the problem would keep increasing.

"It may be that what we are seeing is the result of exposure to the sun decades ago," he said.

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