Non-melanoma skin cancers cost health system $500 million a year

But there’s good news: SunSmart generation set to turn the tables

New research published today (19/11) shows that non-melanoma skin cancers cost the Australian health system more than $500m in 2010 and are expected to cost $700m by 2015.

Using Medicare data, the researchers, whose findings are published in the Medical Journal of Australia, based the cost blowout on an 86 per cent increase in treatments from 1997 to 2010.

Co-author, Professor Rodney Sinclair, Director of Dermatology at the Epworth Hospital Melbourne, said cases rose from 412,000 to 767,000 annually and are set to increase further before they decline.

“The rate in over 65s increased at a significantly higher rate than under 45s,” Professor Sinclair said. “So it’s not all doom and gloom. If this trend continues, as our under 45 ‘SunSmart generation’ gets older, the net effect in coming decades could be billions of dollars in savings.”

Cancer Council Australia CEO, Professor Ian Olver, said the savings were conservative as the research only counted patients treated by GPs and specialists in the community and did not include those treated in public hospitals. “What’s more, the analysis didn’t consider the costs to the individual such as out of pocket medical costs, travel and time away from work,” he said.

“We’re paying the price for a bygone era but the good news is that our prevention campaigns over the last 30 years are having an effect on under 45s. We want to see a substantial reduction, but this research shows even a modest reduction will result in significant savings.”

Chair of Cancer Council’s National Skin Cancer Committee, Terry Slevin, said we can’t afford to become complacent. “In Summer, about one in five adolescents and one in eight adults still report getting sun burned,” he said. “So it’s vital we continue running our cost effective prevention campaigns. Every dollar invested in prevention is estimated to return $2.30.

“It’s equally important we raise awareness of early detection, as treatment is often less invasive and more cost effective when the cancer is caught early. Men are at around twice the risk of skin cancer than women, hence why Cancer Council is focusing on men over 45 during Skin Cancer Action Week this week.”

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