

# Sun-god slaves making a nation's mole problem a mountain



## Suggested level

Suitable for all year levels

## Prepare yourself (teacher)

Pre-reading of The Sunday Age newspaper article *Sun-god slaves making a nation's mole problem a mountain*.

Previous access to Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) is required. You can find out how to use this free internet tool online.

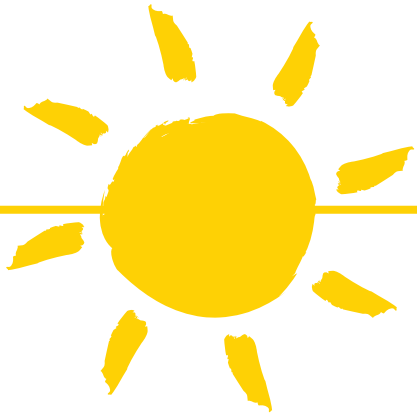
## Class resources

- A copy of *Sun-god slaves making a nation's mole problem a mountain* (provided). Reprinted with permission from The Sunday Age. Article strictly for educational purposes only.

## The activity

Read the article to find out more about the issue of skin cancer for young people.

1. Outline in your own words what skin cancer is.
2. Explain the difference between the three main types of skin cancer.
3. Discuss how skin cancer can affect the life of a patient.
4. Explain how the 'Bronzed Aussie' culture impacts upon our sun protection behaviour.
5. Over time, the desire to get a suntan has decreased. If this is the case, why has the incidence of melanoma for Australian men and women increased? In your response, refer to the data provided in the article.
6. What are the costs in terms of death as a result of melanoma?
7. Provide reasons why it is uncommon for people with naturally very dark skin (skin types five and six) to get skin cancer. Do people with this skin type still need to take care in the sun?
8. Almost 90% of Victorian primary schools actively participate in the SunSmart schools program. Approximately 10% of secondary schools are registered participants of the secondary school UV program. What might be some reasons for the difference in participation rates? List six difficulties the SunSmart program might have in trying to sell their message to adolescents.



### Extension activity

- Using Survey Monkey, create your own online survey to find out how many young people in your class:
  - a. wear sun protective clothing
  - b. wear wide brimmed or bucket hats
  - c. apply sunscreen
  - d. use sunglasses
  - e. do not follow sun protection advice.
- Are there any further sun protection questions you'd like to ask?
- Graph your results – remember to give your graph a title and clearly label both axes.
- From your results, what conclusions can you draw about young people and sun protection behaviours?
- What is currently working?
- How can improvements be made?

# Sun-god slaves making a nation's mole problem a mountain

A spike in Australian skin cancer diagnoses has prompted calls for a tougher, more targeted approach to prevention, writes Jill Stark.

“I’M A slave to the sun god’s rays. I just love it,” says Les Tims, 64, who has spent most of his life by Port Melbourne beach. In summer, he takes his shirt off and walks for two hours in the midday heat. “I feel happiest when I’m in the sun. It’s part of being Australian.” Does he wear sunscreen? Never.

Tims’ worship of the sun may be “part of being Australian”, but we pay for it. Almost 30 years after the now iconic “Slip! Slop! Slap!” campaign began challenging the “bronzed Aussie” culture, Australia remains the skin cancer capital of the world. The disease claims more than 1600 lives a year, up from around 1200 in the early 1990s. Melanoma, the most deadly form, has hit its highest level on record. In Victoria, with a 19 per cent jump in cases from 2004 to 2005, the disease has overtaken lung cancer as the fourth most common cancer.

The culture is stubborn. The number of people baking themselves in the heat is almost as high as it was in the late 1980s. Among teenagers, grilled with SunSmart messages from toddlerhood, progress is slow – one in four suffers sunburn on a typical summer weekend compared to around 14 per cent of adults. Specialists fear that hard-fought behavioural changes are on the verge of reversing.



*Men over the age of 60, like Les Tims, a Port Melbourne beach regular who never wears sunscreen, are increasingly being diagnosed with skin cancer because they missed the SunSmart messages in their youth.*

*Photo: Simon O’Dwyer*

“The worry is that the campaign’s been going for 20 years. There’s a feeling that people have got the message ... but skin cancer rates are still going up and if the programs drop off, people revert back to sitting in the sun and that’s a real risk,” says Peter Foley, an associate professor at the University of Melbourne who is based at the Skin and Cancer Foundation.

There has been progress – people do wear hats more than they did, and sunscreen is more common. In most primary schools, children are banned from the playground without a hat. The number of people who say a tan is desirable has almost halved since the late 1980s. And most of the increase in skin cancer victims are those who never had SunSmart messages as kids – people like Les Tims. But even among those aged about 40, rates are rising, and a large proportion of younger people are still not getting the message.

## Sun-god slaves making a nation's mole problem a mountain (continued)

The stubbornly high rates have prompted calls for a new approach – and much more funding. SunSmart, funded by VicHealth and the Cancer Council, operates in 87 per cent of primary schools, where playgrounds must have adequate shade and students must wear hats outdoors. But only 13 per cent of high schools take part in the program and experts believe the anomaly needs to change, even if hats are “uncool”. There are calls for new buildings to include shade as a matter of course, and for public campaigns to target the most at-risk groups rather than continue with a general “cover up” message.

Rod Sinclair, professor of dermatology at St Vincents, says it is uncommon for people of African or Asian origin to get skin cancer. “The ones who burn the easiest – the fair-skinned people – are the ones at greatest risk, so they’ve got to think carefully about how they expose their skin. It can’t be a one-size-fits-all approach.”

Experts say the spike in skin cancer rates is partly due to greater awareness and better detection as more people seek treatment. Our close proximity to the equator, clear skies and depleted ozone layer give us the highest ultraviolet radiation levels in the world. Professor Foley says rising skin cancer rates are largely due to the time-lag – skin cancer can lie dormant for two or three decades. Older people are increasingly being diagnosed, particularly men over 60.

“Childhood exposure is one of the biggest risk factors for developing melanoma later in life, so although we’re now up to 28 years since the Slip! Slop! Slap! campaign began, it means people over the age of 45 who had that exposure in primary and secondary school – before the message was out there – are developing skin cancers and melanomas.”

But what of younger people, who have never known a time without sunscreen, long-sleeved swimsuits and legionnaire hats? Skin cancer figures among under-25s have dropped, but teenagers are still taking dangerous risks in alarming numbers. Less than a third remember to wear a hat or sunscreen compared to half of adults.

Skin cancer figures take a long time to collect – the most recent data is from 2005. Specialists told The Sunday Age they fear rates could be on the rise as they are starting to see more cases in people in their 20s and 30s. Professor Sinclair says many young people coming to see him have red hair and fair skin. “They have usually had a lot of sun exposure and spent a lot of time down the beach, and we do see more people who are using solariums. But it’s like smoking: everyone knows it’s bad for you but some people will still smoke despite the risk. Amongst the young people I see, ignorance is not the reason they have got skin cancer; they have just chosen not to do anything about sun protection.”

For Richmond teacher Matt Stevic, 29, who contracted melanoma at age 22 after a fortnight “scorching” himself on a beach in Noosa, sun protection was not on his radar. “I was fairly naive. I just didn’t think it could happen that quickly. I was on holiday and wandering around with my shirt off. I just thought it was sort of cool to have a tan so didn’t really bother to put on sunscreen. I was lucky I got it early because it could have killed me. I guess it takes something like that to give you a wake-up call.”

Australians aged 12 to 24 are more likely to contract melanoma than any other cancer. The fashion editors who depict the body bronzed as the most beautiful should shoulder some of the blame, according to John Kelly, head of the Victorian Melanoma Service at The Alfred hospital.

## Sun-god slaves making a nation's mole problem a mountain (continued)

“Teenagers are, by nature, resistant to health prevention messages – they feel immortal and they’re very much subject to peer pressure. If the media continue to promote a tan via advertising with tanned models and promotions for vacation spots that say ‘you’ll get nice and brown’, then there’s a subliminal message that there’s something cool about a tan, and young people are very slavish in what they perceive to be the right look.”

Getting a group of natural risk-takers to protect against a disease that might not affect them for decades is a huge challenge. Melanie Wakefield, director of behavioural research at the Cancer Council Victoria, says adolescents are less likely to wear hats for fashion reasons but often they forget to protect themselves with clothing and sunscreen – so reminders through mass media campaigns are vital.

“Towards the end of the 1990s and into the noughties, we’ve seen a plateauing of those effects (of campaigns) right up until the summer of 2006-07, when there was a national campaign run and we saw some improvement. If we take our foot off the pedal we could risk seeing some reversal of those gains and that would be a tragedy,” Ms Wakefield says.

One problem is money. In a report to be released early next year, the Cancer Council will warn that, without major investment, skin cancer rates will rise more steeply and deaths will mount. Specialist clinics are already struggling with the surge in demand, and there are fears potentially higher temperatures caused by climate change

will exacerbate the problem. SunSmart in Victoria, which began in 1988, eight years after “Slip! Slop! Slap!” was launched, has invested \$20 million in campaigns.

But despite skin cancer being the most expensive cancer to treat, costing more than \$300 million a year, the Federal Government only began funding national prevention campaigns three years ago. The current campaign, which includes a television ad showing a young woman having a melanoma surgically removed, had an immediate positive impact on use of sunscreen and hats, according to Craig Sinclair, chairman of the Cancer Council’s national skin cancer committee.

“We’re now in an unfortunate situation where we have no indication that the investment will continue beyond this summer, despite evidence that it works. Some states rely solely on charity to fund SunSmart programs, so the investment is piecemeal and minimal given how much skin cancer costs our health system.”

The “Slip! Slop! Slap!” message has been praised for its simplicity, but that may no longer be its strength. “Unlike the ‘Quit’ campaign,” says Rod Sinclair, “where you can get the message out that one cigarette is bad for you, with the sun it’s not as clear-cut because it can depend a lot on skin type. Some people actually benefit from getting out in the sun, particularly black-skinned women who may cover up for religious reasons and don’t get enough vitamin D.

“We can’t solve an entire problem with a single strategy.”

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