

SKIN CANCER PRIMARY PREVENTION IN NZ PRIMARY SCHOOLS

FEEDBACK TO PARTICIPANTS

Who are we?

We are a research unit based at the University of Otago, funded by the Cancer Society and University to help provide quality research that primarily focuses on the prevention of cancer. Apart from ultraviolet radiation in relation to skin cancer, our research topics include alcohol, Hauora Māori, physical activity and nutrition, tobacco control and psycho-social-spiritual health.

WHY HAVE WE CHOSEN TO FOCUS OUR EFFORTS ON SKIN CANCER?

In NZ we enjoy clear skies and outdoor lifestyles. The downside of this is that we (with Australia) have the highest skin cancer rates in the world. Annually, more New Zealanders die from skin cancer than in road crashes. In addition, many thousands of people are treated for skin cancer with an estimated treatment cost in excess of \$57 million each year. This makes it one of the most expensive cancers for the NZ health system. The incidence of melanoma skin cancer has risen steadily over the past 20 years. Yet there is compelling evidence that most of these and other skin cancers are preventable. They are mainly caused by excessive exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation (UVR).

Why is sun protection needed in schools?

Health begins where we live, learn, play and work. Children are at school during peak UVR hours, five days a week, and some of that time is spent outdoors. Excessive UVR exposure during childhood is critical—DNA damage is irreversible and exposure is cumulative through the life span. Students are taking part in many outdoor activities such as camps, sports days and swimming sports where, unfortunately, some do get sunburnt.

About you

It is very important in a survey like this that we get the views of as many schools as possible so that we can provide the Cancer Society with information that represents our diverse society.

We were thrilled that over 62% of all primary schools (nationwide) took part in the survey. Schools that participated in the survey were generally representative of 'all schools' in terms of demographic profile and geographic location.

The process?

The SunSmart Schools Accreditation Programme (SSAP), launched in New Zealand in 2005, follows WHO guidelines for 'best practice' for addressing sun protective practices in primary schools. Administration and provision of resources is co-ordinated nationally, with programme delivery provided by each of the six Cancer Society Divisions at a regional level. As it is 12 years since the launch of the programme it is timely to reassess sun protection policies and practices in primary schools and see how well the programme is working in schools using the programme (and compare that to schools not using the programme). We are currently undertaking the data analysis for that component of the study and will publish those results in due course accompanied with a media release. In the interim we have provided you with some overall key results from the survey.

Key results

The provision of shade is important because it reduces the need for the child to engage in a particular sun protective behaviour. It can also protect not only current students but generations of students to come. Ideally, there should be adequate shade in the school grounds for students to undertake passive activities, like eating lunch, or outdoor lessons. Of course shade is expensive to install (as many of you told us) and there is no support from the Ministry of Education to fund shade in existing schools and this is of serious concern to us. Both our Unit and the Cancer Society are continuing to advocate with the Ministry of Education on this issue. The results from the survey provide some evidence to assist us.

From the survey

- **74% schools have enough shade for passive activities (lunch etc)**
- **14% have enough shade for active activities (playground etc)**

Environmental shade is not always an option, for example you can't put shade cover over an entire sports field and we want our children to be physically active so that is when personal protection becomes really important. Sun protective hats (broad brimmed, bucket or legionnaire design) should be worn. Caps are not sun protective as they do not protect all areas of the face or neck where many skin cancers develop.

- **72% only allowed sun protective hats (during terms 1 and 4)**
- **A number of schools are allowing caps in senior school which is of concern as these may be viewed as 'a badge of seniority' and undermine best practice**

The wearing of sun-protective clothing can provide a physical barrier that substantially reduces the amount of UVR reaching the skin.

- **76% of schools encouraged 'sun protective' clothing or had a school uniform that was sun protective**

It is key that if we are asking students to engage in a particular behaviour that staff members are role modelling the same behaviour.

- **58% of schools required staff members to wear a broad brimmed hat when outdoors (during terms 1 and 4)**

Having a formal written policy on sun protection and including sun protection formally in Risk Management Systems for EOTC is important as it signals the expectation of the Board of Trustees that the school will provide an environment where students and staff can be safe in the sun.

- **91% of schools have a formal written sun protection policy or procedure**
- **66% of schools always formally include sun protection in their Risk Management Systems for EOTC activities (during terms 1 and 4)**

The use of sunscreen is particularly important during all day outdoor events where children have prolonged UVR exposure.

- **75% of schools encouraged the use of broad spectrum sunscreen of at least SPF30 (during terms 1 and 4)**

Schools are places of learning where there are opportunities to provide students with accurate, comprehensive information on UVR. Education can be tailored to fit many of the curriculum areas, as demonstrated in the curriculum resources developed by the Cancer Society for primary schools. Schools who had used these resources rated them very highly, with a mean score of 8/10.

(<http://www.sunsmartschools.org.nz/teachers/curriculum-resources>)

- **72% of schools included a formal education programme on sun protection as part of the curriculum at least once during primary years**

Contact the research team

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