

S L O W B U R N

With around two out of three Australians to be diagnosed with skin cancer in their lifetime, ‘Australia’s cancer’ continues to pose a significant risk in a warming world. But state-of-the-art mole mapping scans and focused public-awareness campaigns are helping, finally, to push back against the scourge

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In June 2025, consumer group CHOICE published findings that 16 out of selected 20 sunscreens had failed to meet their labelled protection claims in independent-lab testing. The fallout led to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) recalling or pausing the sale of the products in question, and thus putting at risk the previously immaculate reputation of Australian sunscreens – and, more importantly, public trust in sunscreen itself.

With the highest rates of melanoma globally, Australia and New Zealand are regarded as the skin-cancer hotspots of the world. Melanoma (the most serious of the three main forms

of skin cancer, ahead of basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma) is still the third-most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia, according to the Cancer Council, with an estimated one in 17 people likely to be diagnosed with the condition by age 85. No surprise, then, that CHOICE’s findings caused a stir.

“We seem to accept that tanning and sunburn are normal, even ‘the Australian way of life,’” reflects Tamara Dawson, director of the Melanoma and Skin Cancer Advocacy Network (MSCAN) and a survivor of stage IV melanoma. She believes an attitude of ‘it won’t happen to me’ pervades the collective mindset when it comes to skin cancer. “[But] the

Image: Avinash Kumar/Unsplash.

statistics tell us very clearly that it is *likely* to happen to us. Two in three Australians will be diagnosed with a type of skin cancer before they turn 70.”

Cancer Council data also shows that Australia’s incidence rate for melanoma increased by 120 per cent between 1982-2019, with similar rises observed in other parts of the world. Dr Mariana Noy, consultant dermatologist at London’s Montrose Clinic, partly attributes these spikes to increased awareness around skin health. “[When I ask people] ‘What brought you in today?’, they [answer], ‘My friend was just diagnosed with skin cancer,’” she notes. “There’s much more early detection.”

Montrose Clinic offers a state-of-the-art mole-mapping service, which deploys the know-how of a team of dermatologists, plastic surgeons and nurses. “We do a full skin examination and we’ll also have a look with a dermatoscope,

that seem] unusual or suspicious, bring them to your doctor’s attention ASAP.”

Have attitudes towards sun safety evolved over time? Soyer has noticed significant improvements in how people behave – even among older generations, who would once have used an oil to accelerate tanning. “Many who previously did not use sunscreen or wear hats or long sleeves have now adopted these habits into their daily lives.”

“I started as a dermatologist about 12 years ago,” says Noy. “[Today,] when I [ask patients], ‘Have you ever used a sunbed?’, [most] say, ‘Oh, God, no’. Whereas 10 years ago, they’d say, ‘Yes, once or twice a week’. I definitely think that trend has gone down.”

Despite broader public awareness, Noy remains concerned by the persistent idea of a ‘safe tan’. “People refer to it as a ‘healthy glow,’” she notes. “A tan is a sign that

“Skin checks now are ad hoc . . . We think there’s an opportunity [for Australia] to lead the world with screening for skin cancer”
– Tamara Dawson

our instrument which polarises the light, magnifies and lets us look in really good detail.”

They take imagery with Canfield Scientific’s IntelliStudio – a medical photography unit that’s the only one of its kind in the country – to take high-resolution photos of every part of the body at 200x magnification and uses AI to grade lesions in order of concern. The machine stores them to be compared from scan to scan, so helps in the detection of worrying changes very early in the process, says Noy. A similar service is offered by MoleMap at more than 50 clinics across Australia and a number of partner clinics in New Zealand.

How often a professional skin check should be undertaken depends on an individual’s risk profile. “Key factors to consider include skin type and sensitivity to sun exposure, [a] family history of skin cancer, [the] number and type of moles or freckles, past sunburns and any previous skin-cancer diagnosis,” explains Professor Peter Soyer of the University of Queensland and Fellow of the Australasian College of Dermatologists. One’s level of sun exposure – both over a lifetime and day-to-day – is also critical. “We know from well-established evidence that UV exposure is a key factor in the development of skin cancer,” he says.

Regardless of risk level, Soyer stresses the importance of regular self-skin checks. “No one knows your skin better than you do,” he points out. “It is essential to feel empowered and confident when raising any concerns about your skin with your doctor. If you notice any changes, especially [ones

your DNA has been damaged and your skin is trying to protect itself.”

Dawson is excited by the world’s largest clinical trial of AI-assisted skin imaging being led by researchers at the University of Queensland, Monash University and the University of Sydney. The imaging deploys 3D total-body photography to determine a patient’s relative risk of skin cancer, and provide guidance to clinicians as to how frequently the patient should be assessed by a professional or whether a biopsy is advisable. “It’s incredible screening technology that could enable at-risk Australians, including in rural and regional Australia, to get the right skin check at the right time,” she says.

Dawson is hopeful the research will pave the way for a targeted national-screening program. “Skin checks now are ad hoc,” she says. “[Such a] program will help detect cancer at a critical early stage, reduce the burden of unnecessary screening on our health system and provide more equitable access to potentially life-saving screening. We think there’s an opportunity to lead the world with screening for skin cancer.” **HB**

Sunscreen is not a complete sun-protection solution, experts warn. Avoid prolonged sun exposure and wear protective clothing, hats and eyewear when you’re in the sun. When using sunscreen, always read the label, follow the directions for use and reapply frequently.