

here comes the sun

It costs the community in excess of \$150 million a year and kills more than 1200 Australians over the same period. Skin cancer is preventable yet some are still ignoring the message. JULIE NANCE spoke to three people who learnt the hard way.

When 26-year-old Sue McLean unwrapped the bandages covering her chest for the first time after surgery, she was shocked at the size of her scar. After several years spent sunbaking over the summer holidays, she cottoned onto sun protection at the age of 18. But the damage had been done. During a visit to the doctor four months ago for an unrelated problem, Sue casually mentioned a mole on her chest had changed colour and shape. Her doctor referred her to a dermatologist who soon removed the mole and sent it away for biopsy. It proved to be a melanoma.

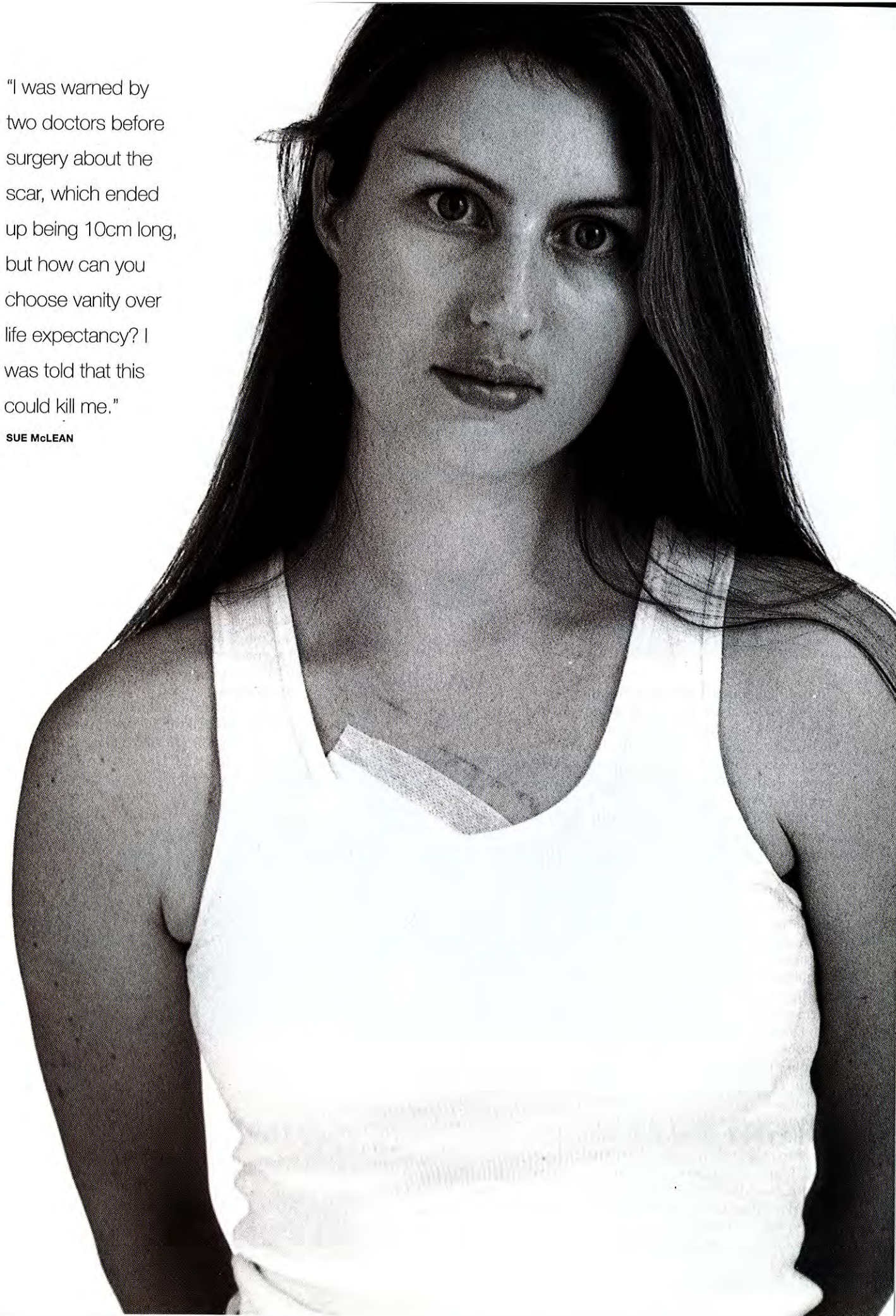
"I'd actually noticed a change in the mole for about a month but hadn't got around to doing anything about it," says Sue, who only brought up the subject at the insistence of her boyfriend. "I'm really glad I mentioned it. I ended up having a wide area of tissue taken off my chest to ensure they got all the cancer. I was warned by two doctors before surgery about the scar which ended up being 10cm long but how can you choose vanity over your life expectancy? I was told that this could kill me."

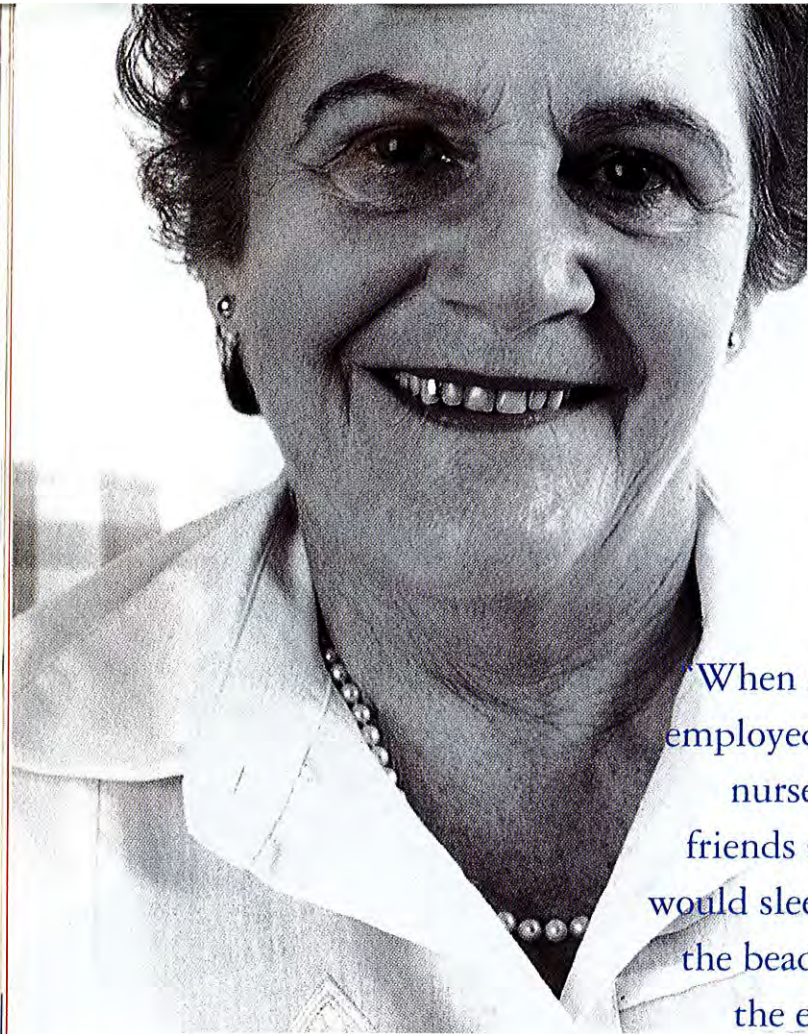
It's a fear Jan Sissian knows well. Since the day she learned to walk, Jan had a love affair with the sun. By her teenage years the relationship was a passionate one. Bottles of baby oil smothered over her delicate skin every weekend gave those powerful rays extra punch. The quest was on for the perfect tan and severe sunburn and blisters were just a minor obstacle along the way. The word "sunscreen" was never part of the sun-worshiper's vocab – only those valuable pain-relief remedies including slices of tomato, vinegar and cold tea were ever passed around.

When the first of many sun spots were burnt off Jan's face, back and hands 15 years ago, the sun's appeal dimmed. In April 1994 – almost six decades after her first unprotected exposure – the affair was over. Testing of a mark on her thigh resulted in the diagnosis of a melanoma – the most dangerous form of skin cancer.

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SUE McLEAN





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JAN SISSIAN

“I was quite stunned and thought this just couldn't be,” says 62-year-old Jan. “As a youngster we didn't have block-out and didn't even know about melanoma. Every weekend and school holidays I was forever in the surf or on my father's boat – often getting really badly burnt. When I was older and employed as a nurse, my friends and I would sleep on the beach for the day following night shift, covered in baby-oil.”

Jan was admitted to hospital and had the melanoma and a large area of tissue around it removed. Twelve months later a lump was detected in her groin. What was discovered is described by Jan as “the worst part of the whole ordeal” – melanoma cells had spread to her nearby lymph nodes. The lump and lymph nodes (small, bean-shaped structures that produce and store infection-fighting cells) were removed. However, the side-effect was a marked lack of circulation and Jan will have to wear thick surgical stockings over her legs for the rest of her life to prevent them swelling.

Life was finally looking brighter until October last year when Jan had yet another lump – this time on her right thigh – removed and diagnosed as a melanoma. “I thought ‘these things keep popping up everywhere’,” says Jan, who has five daughters. “Since then all my three-monthly tests have proved negative and I am very optimistic about my future. You don't take life for granted any more after an experience like this – every day is a bonus. I urge people to cover up in the sun and see their doctor

immediately, even if they are worried about the tiniest mark. I know people who have died from melanoma – seeing all the ill young people in the melanoma ward is just heart-breaking.”

Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world – each year it claims the lives of more than 1200 people and costs the community in excess of \$150 million. Two out of three Australians will develop the disease during their lifetime with 5,500 new cases of melanoma and 150,000 cases of other skin cancers reported nationally each year.

A reduction in exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation has the potential to prevent most skin cancers, and if detected early, there is a 95 per cent cure rate. Sun awareness campaigns have had a significant impact on people's attitudes and habits over recent years but deputy director of the Sydney Melanoma Unit, Professor John Thompson, says dangerous myths still abound. He says it is a common misbelief that people who do not have fair skin, blonde hair and freckles are immune to skin cancer.

“The other myth is that people imagine melanomas only occur in sun-exposed areas of the body, which is totally wrong,” says Professor Thompson, whose unit is based at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. “Sunshine has a lot to do with it but people can get a melanoma on the sole of their foot which never sees the sun. The whole pigment cell system of the body is affected by the sun exposure.”

Most damage to the skin caused by over-exposure to the sun occurs in adolescence – a major risk factor in the development of skin cancer later in life. Professor Thompson warns: “You can't undo the damage done in childhood – even if you never see the sun again. Evidence suggests if you are sensible later in life and don't aggravate the problem you can keep the risk down but it will never reduce to nil.”

As Australians head to the beach as usual this summer, experts say they should spare a thought for the hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic – already twice the size of Europe. Dr Paul Fraser of the CSIRO's Atmospheric Research Division, says every 1 per cent ozone loss may result in a 2 per cent increase in skin-damaging UV radiation allowed through the upper atmosphere. “Ozone depletion in Australia is estimated to be 10 per cent worse per decade but we are not able to accurately say how much worse skin cancer is due to this problem,” says Dr Fraser. “What it does highlight is the need for vigilance in UV radiation exposure during summer.”

Although Australia has the world's highest incidence of melanoma, a recently released study has found we are now a world leader in trying to turn the epidemic around. The Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria has revealed a 60-year increase in melanoma mortality rates has been halted, with female death rates starting to

There are three types of skin cancer:

■ **Basal cell carcinoma (BCC):** The most common form of the disease – usually appearing on the head, neck and upper body as small round or flattened lumps. They are coloured red or a pale pearl. They can also become ulcerated like a sore that will not heal.

■ **Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC):** More dangerous than Basal cells. They appear as a scaly red spot or sore that does not heal and bleeds easily, usually on the part of the skin exposed to the sun. Seldom fatal, they can be disfiguring if not treated early.

■ **Melanoma:** The most dangerous skin cancer. If not detected early and treated properly, cancer cells spread to other parts of the body and can cause death. They can appear anywhere on the body, usually as a new spot, unusual mole or freckle that changes colour and develops over a period of weeks or months.

■ **SKIN CANCER IS THE THIRD MOST COMMON CAUSE OF CANCER-RELATED DEATH IN MEN AND WOMEN.** Only lung and prostate cancers claim more men. Only breast and bowel cancers claim more women.

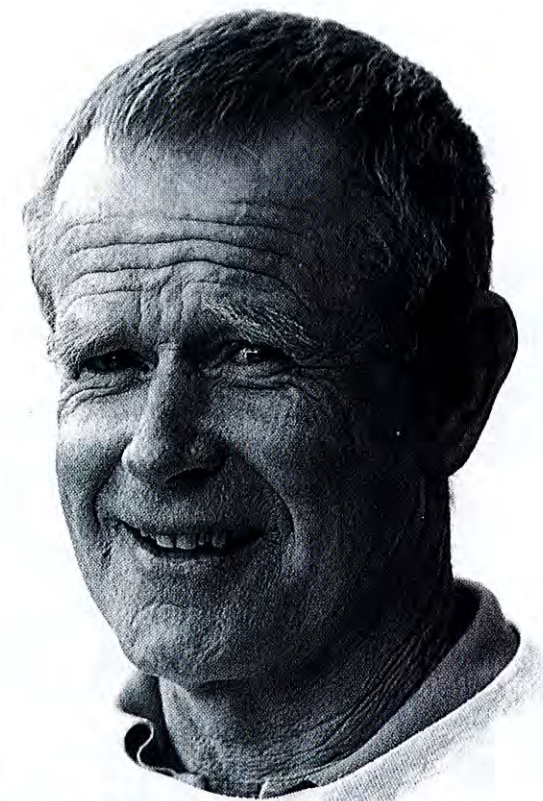
drop and the overall death rate leveling off since 1985. Report author Dr Graham Giles says early detection efforts and health education campaigns have both had an impact on the falling rates – about 20 years earlier than predicted.

While there has been an estimated 11-12 per cent yearly growth in sales of SPF15 plus sunscreens since 1987 and a gradual shift towards fake tanning products, experts agree there is still no room for complacency. A 1994 NSW Department of Health study found only 45 per cent of beach-goers were using a high level of protection and 19 per cent were not protected at all. Half of the adolescents surveyed still believed clothes that protect you from the sun looked “daggy”.

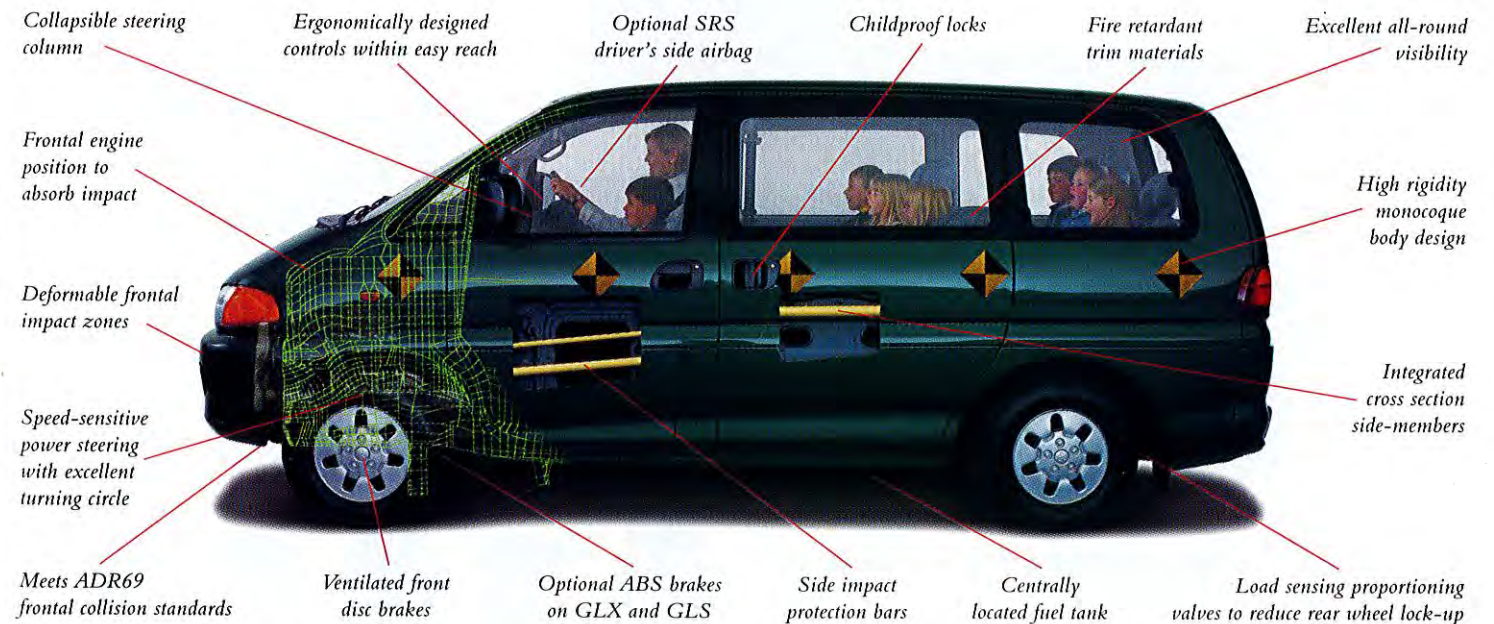
PE teacher John McQueen says young people today have no excuse not to protect their skin with sun warnings giving them a “tremendous advantage” over their parents and grandparents. The fair-skinned, ginger-haired 57-year-old has a dreadful legacy to show for his younger surfer days and 36 years of constant sun exposure in the course of his job.

John has lost count of the “thousands” of sun spots he's had frozen off his body over the past 25 years not to mention the long list of potentially-dangerous skin cancers surgically removed along the way. If it wasn't for his twice-yearly visits to the skin specialist, where dozens of sun spots are always treated, his future may not look bright.

“The sun spots, which are a pre-cancerous condition, are not painful, don't irritate me and usually come and go,” says John,



“The specialist often identifies skin cancers I haven't spotted – there is a lot of expertise in recognising the dangerous ones.” JOHN McQUEEN



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whose main trouble areas are his face, neck, hands and arms. "You feel them rather than see them – they are little raised portions of skin. The specialist often identifies skin cancers I haven't spotted – there is a lot of expertise in recognising the dangerous ones."

For nine months 34-year-old Janice Thompson shrugged off a small raised portion of white skin which appeared behind her knee. The only reason she went to the doctor and asked for it to be removed was because she kept nicking it when shaving. Within days Janice was given the news that the mark was a melanoma – in the later stages of malignancy.

"I was completely devastated. I have always been very careful in the sun because I am fair," says Janice. "I didn't like the appearance of that tiny mark but now I have an ugly large scar after the tumour was removed and quite a bit of muscle and glands around the area were taken out. Although I can walk on it, my leg feels numb from the ankle to above the knee and my other leg looks unsightly after a skin graft was taken off it."

Janice spent 14 days in hospital after a blood clot developed in her leg and she says she is so self-conscious about her scars she may never wear a swimming costume or shorts again. "I wish I'd gone to the doctor earlier. I'm just thankful I have still got my leg – it could have been a lot worse."

AGT

REDUCING THE RISK OF SKIN CANCER

- **STAY OUT OF THE SUN** between 10am and 2pm (Eastern Standard time) or 11am and 3pm during daylight saving, when 66 per cent of the day's radiation occurs.
- **SLIP ON A SHIRT** with collar and sleeves.
- **SLOP ON A SUNSCREEN** that is SPF15 plus, broad spectrum and water resistant. It should be applied about 20 minutes before going into the sun. Apply it generously so that it goes on easily and evenly. It should also be reapplied every two hours. Note: no sunscreen provides 100 per cent protection.
- **SLAP ON A HAT** with a wide brim or a cap with flaps to shade your face, neck and ears.
- **SLIDE ON SUNGLASSES** with Australian Standard AS 1067 that fit the face well. Children should wear sunglasses when their eyes are exposed to glare from reflected surfaces such as water, snow and sand.
- **BABIES** should not be exposed to direct sunlight. Be careful on cloudy days when the sun's rays still cause damage. Sunscreen should only be used if there is no other protection available.
- **CONSULT A DOCTOR** if a new spot is detected or a spot or mole has changed in size, colour or shape. The earlier a suspected skin cancer is reported, the better the chances of successful treatment.
- **USE SHADE** whenever you can including trees, shelters and umbrellas.
- **A TAN IS NOT A SIGN OF HEALTH**, it shows the skin has received enough UV radiation to be damaged.
- **HIGHER ALTITUDE SPELLS HIGHER RISK** as the air on a mountain slope, for example, is much thinner than it is at sea level and there is less atmosphere to filter out any harmful rays.
- **HOLIDAY BAKE-IT** spells trouble. More than two-thirds of people are burned while on holidays. Most rely too heavily on sunscreens.
- **VACCINE:** Australian and overseas scientists are working on different vaccines which help the body's immune system to recognise and tackle melanoma. This research is in its infancy and has had mixed results, although a Queensland Institute Of Medical Research team is now testing a vaccine it describes as "very promising".
- **MORE INFORMATION** about sun awareness, protective products and skin cancer is available from the Health Department or Cancer Council in your state.



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