



Skin cancer in general practice

Impact of an early detection campaign

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BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2004–2005, The Cancer Council NSW conducted a skin cancer early detection campaign encouraging people aged over 50 years to check their own skin and see a doctor as soon as possible if they noticed any suspicious or changing spots.

METHOD

Self administered questionnaires were posted to 1136 general practitioners in New South Wales to seek information on the impact of the campaign and their interest in further training.

RESULTS

The questionnaire was completed by 311 GPs (27%). General practitioners reported increased activity in skin cancer detection, however these increases were higher in the younger patient age groups. More than two-thirds of practitioners, especially those from skin cancer clinics, expressed interest in further training.

DISCUSSION

Respondents found the campaign resources useful. General practitioners reported greater increases in the number of younger people requesting skin cancer checks compared to the targeted group of people aged over 50 years. The survey shows a clear trend of GPs aged 60 years and over reporting higher levels of attendance of skin cancer patients among older age groups.

Skin cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia.¹⁻³ Previous research shows that people in older age groups, although well informed about skin cancer issues, are less likely to regard skin cancer as a serious health risk⁴ and are less likely to perform skin self examination than younger people.⁵

General practitioners are in an important position to heighten awareness of skin cancer among those at high risk, especially older adults who have significant accumulated sun exposure. The demonstration of skin self examination by primary care physicians has a strong influence on ongoing practice by patients.^{6,7}

The Cancer Council NSW conducted the 'Save Your Own Skin' campaign to promote early detection of skin cancer in people aged over 50 years by improving patient knowledge and encouraging regular skin self examination. An important component of the campaign was to provide GPs with resources to support them in the event of increased patient requests for skin examinations. In October 2004, all general practice clinics in New South Wales (n=3289) were sent campaign resources including a diagnostic reference guide for GPs and a patient risk and self examination leaflet pad.

The Cancer Council NSW surveyed GPs as part of its evaluation of the usefulness and impact of the 'Save Your Own Skin' resources. Presented here are the results of this survey, including the stated training needs of GPs.

Method

In mid 2005, a self administered questionnaire was mailed to 1136 GPs in NSW. Eight hundred and thirty-five (73%) of these GPs had ordered resources in addition to those sent to them at the launch of the campaign.

Results

Three hundred and eleven completed questionnaires were returned (27% response rate). Survey respondents were broadly representative of NSW GPs in terms of location, age and hours worked (*Table 1*). The sample was slightly under representative of large practices (five or more in a practice) compared to solo practices ($\chi^2=30.62$, $df=9$, $p<0.001$).⁸

Sixty-seven percent of all participating GPs and 100% of skin cancer clinics reported having diagnosed a melanoma within the past 12 months, with almost all (94%) reporting having made a diagnosis of nonmelanoma skin cancer in the past 12 months.

Table 1. Characteristics of participating practitioners compared to all NSW GPs

	Study sample		All NSW ¹⁵	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Female	90	29.5	2998	37.3
Male	215	70.5	5043	62.7
Age				
<40 years	38	12.3	1394	17.3
40–49 years	92	29.9	2567	31.9
50–59 years	99	32.1	2424	30.2
60+ years	79	25.6	2849	20.6
Hours of work				
<2 days/week	11	3.6		
2–4 days/week	60	19.7		
Part time	71	23.3	5318	21.0
>5 days/week	233	76.6	14 232	79.0
Practice type				
Skin cancer clinic	19	6.3		
Solo GP	116	38.4		17.2
Small practice	112	37.1		39.0
Large practice	55	18.2		35.9

Eighty-five percent of respondents found the campaign resources moderately or very useful. General practitioners reported prompting more patients about skin cancer as a result of the campaign, increased numbers of patients seeking a routine full body skin check and increased numbers of patients asking about a skin spot or lesion (Figure 1). However, the increases were higher in the younger patient age groups than in the older patient age groups.

General practitioners were also asked if they would benefit from further skin cancer training, and were given three options for training delivery: online learning, educational evenings and dermatologist mentoring. More than two-thirds of GPs expressed interest in further training, with over 80% favouring educational evenings. Online learning was the least preferred option (67%), although 97% of GPs aged under 40 years preferred this style of learning (Figure 2).

Doctors working in skin cancer clinics expressed the highest level of interest in training (84% across all options); GPs working in solo practices showed the least interest (68%).

Discussion

The results of the survey show that respondents found the campaign resources useful and that they had a positive impact, with the patient resources being noted as having the largest impact (78–87%). All respondents from skin cancer clinics found the resources useful. Positive responses to the diagnostic reference guide increased with GP age.

The 27% response rate was modest and reflects the difficulty in obtaining adequate responses from GPs; however it compares favourably to response rates achieved by commercial surveys of GPs.⁹ The survey participants were broadly representative of NSW GPs. The majority of GPs who participated in the survey (84%) had already expressed an interest in skin cancer by ordering additional campaign materials and therefore may have been more interested in skin cancer than the 'average' doctor.

Skin cancer is the most common cancer managed by GPs in Australia¹⁰ but there is little research about the role of GPs or skin cancer clinic doctors in skin cancer diagnosis and

management. This survey shows that doctors in skin cancer clinics are willing to undertake further training and supports the proposal by Wilkinson et al¹⁰ for an 'agenda of training, standards, accreditation, audit and research to ensure that skin cancer clinics provide optimal health outcomes for patients'. Moreover, the training needs identified by doctors in skin cancer clinics indicates a lack of accessible education opportunities, as has been previously reported.^{11–14}

General practitioners reported greater increases in the number of younger people requesting skin cancer checks compared to the targeted group of people aged over 50 years. A '60 Minutes' television program about the effects of melanoma on younger people went to air during the campaign period and may have influenced younger patients to see their GP for skin cancer checks. The survey highlights the difficulty of communicating skin cancer messages to older patients.

The survey shows a clear trend of GPs aged 60 years and over reporting higher levels of attendance of skin cancer patients among older age groups (80% reported prompting more patients aged 75 years and over compared to the average of 64.3%). More research is needed to establish whether older GPs see a greater proportion of older patients than their younger colleagues and therefore whether GPs aged 60 years and over should be the focus of attempts to communicate early detection advice to older Australians. This would also influence the choice of training options (we found that educational evenings were the most popular training option, particularly among older GPs).

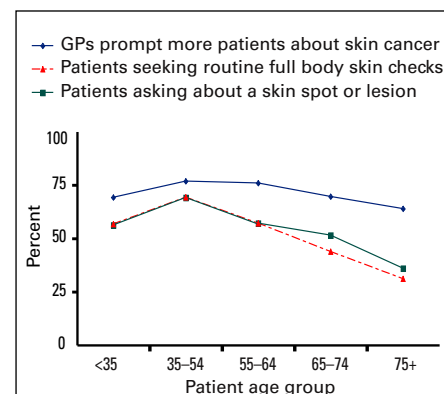


Figure 1. Percentage of NSW GPs reporting increased numbers of skin care consultations by patient age group

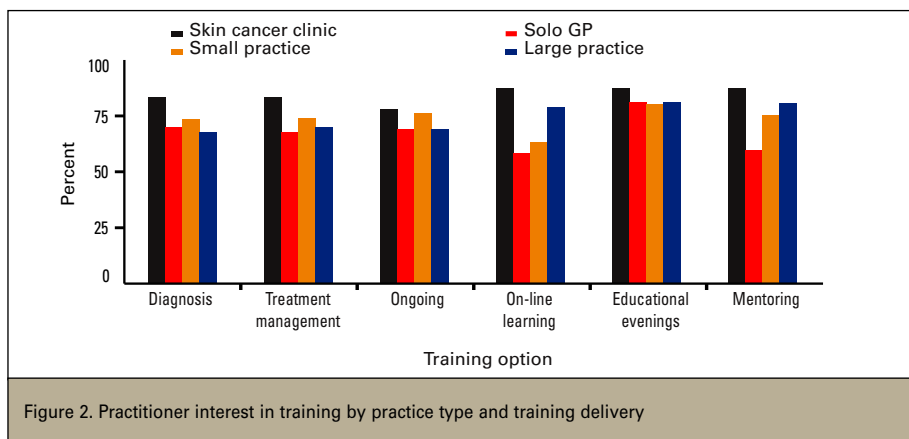


Figure 2. Practitioner interest in training by practice type and training delivery

General practitioners who expressed an interest in training consistently reported that they prompted more patients – and had more patients consult them – about skin cancer. Further training has the potential to deliver better early detection outcomes to the older patient.

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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