

Tuesday 12 August 2008

Workplace commitment key to sun protection for outdoor workers

Maximising outdoor workers' sun safety requires a workplace-level approach rather than individual-based one, according to University of Otago researchers.

A pilot study has found that outdoor workers who perceive that their workplaces support healthy behaviours are more likely to protect themselves from excessive sun exposure.

Study co-author Dr Tony Reeder, Director of the Cancer Society Social & Behavioural Research Unit at the University, says the findings indicate that focusing on workplace policies and practices, rather than on individual responsibility alone, will yield the greatest benefits for skin cancer prevention.

The study, just published in the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, is first in New Zealand to look at both individual and workplace factors involved in sun protection among outdoor workers.

Seventy-four horticultural, roading and building workers employed at 14 Central Otago workplaces were surveyed during the 2007 summer by postgraduate student Vanessa Hammond.

"Overall, we found outdoor workers' perceptions of their workplace's support for sun protection and other health-related behaviours strongly influenced their personal protective behaviour," says Dr Reeder.

Greater attention needs to be paid to ensuring that existing guidelines are translated into industry and workplace policies and practices, he says.

"To foster a supportive safety climate, skin cancer control programmes should also be developed alongside other workplace health and safety interventions."

For example, occupational health nurses could provide direct workplace training that included skin checks for workers.

"Focusing on the damage that sun exposure causes to the skin and the eyes might help increase outdoor workers' understanding of their personal risk."

Ms Hammond says that it is important that employers provide sun protective gear such as appropriate clothing, hats and sunscreen.

“Supervisors and forepersons also need to promote and support their use and set an example by their own practices.”

Future studies should investigate the barriers to employers taking greater responsibility for promoting the sun safety of their employees, she says.

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Tony Reeder, Director
Cancer Society Social & Behavioural Research Unit
Department of Preventive and Social Medicine
Dunedin School of Medicine
Tel 03 479 7257
Email tony.reeder@otago.ac.nz

For comment, contact:

Dr. Judith Galtry
Cancer Society of New Zealand, Skin Cancer Control Advisor
Tel 04 9058 037
Mob 0274 583 484
Email jag@cancer.org.nz