

Advice to avoid sun should be lifted, say cancer experts

A REVERSAL of official advice on the dangers of the sun was called for yesterday in what could lead to one of the biggest revisions of a health warning in decades.

The head of Britain's drive to cut soaring skin cancer rates said the advice to restrict sunbathing is "draconian and unnecessary" and should be lifted.

For at least a decade, doctors have warned sunbathers that "there is no such thing as a healthy tan". Now, Dr Neil Walker, chairman of the UK Skin Cancer Prevention Working Party, an umbrella group of more than a dozen professional organisations, says the warning is counter-productive.

"The phrase 'no such thing as a healthy tan' is one way of getting the message across that sun damage can lead to the development of potentially fatal skin cancers. I think we need to look at this again. I think telling people to avoid the sun entirely is draconian and unnecessary."

Dr Walker, consultant dermatologist at the Churchill Hospital, Oxford, said millions of people went on holiday every year with the aim of getting a tan and telling them to stay out of the sun invited ridicule.

"There are a lot of people [on the working party] who have this almost religious conviction about the dangers of the sun. My view has been that we have got to try to look at things practically. But the zealots rule at the moment."

He added: "There may be an argument that there is no such thing as a safe tan but it is not an argument that works. We

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have to find a way of putting the message across about what is the most damaging behaviour, which is why I tell my patients not to bake or burn."

About 50,000 people a year in Britain develop skin cancers, most of which involve minor lesions which are easily removed. In 2000, there were 7,000 cases of melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer, up 24 per cent in five years.

The rise in melanoma, one of the fastest-growing cancers, is linked with the growing number of Britons holidaying abroad and some evidence suggests that it is sun exposure in childhood that is the main risk.

But some experts say the benefits of the sun have been underplayed. Sitting in the sun is enjoyable and relaxing, makes people feel better and stimulates production of vitamin D, which may protect against a range of diseases.

Professor George Davey Smith and colleagues at the University of Bristol said in a paper in the *British Medical Journal* in 1999: "For many people the small absolute increase in risk of melanoma could easily be outweighed by the effect of reduced sunlight on mood."

Sara Hiom, of Cancer Research UK, defended the warning that there is no safe tan. "The reasoning behind that comment is that a tan is a sign of DNA damage which can lead to skin cancer later in life. Of course having a tiny bit of golden colour is safer than

burning in the sun. But we have to come out with these rather strident comments to get the message across. We have to be rather strict."

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