

A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR SKIN CANCER PREVENTION IN NSW

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Skin cancer remains an important public health issue in Australia due to its high prevalence, large burden on the health system and amenability to prevention. NSW has a strong track record of successful sun protection programs. This article presents the key directions as set out in the recently released *NSW Skin Cancer Prevention Strategic Plan 2001–2005*. The article also provides an overview of the organisational partnerships, networks and relationships that provide the building blocks for increasing the capacity to implement skin cancer prevention programs in NSW.

SKIN CANCER: AN IMPORTANT PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

Australian cancer incidence figures are dominated by skin cancer. New cases of skin cancer outnumber all other forms of cancer by more than three to one.¹ Currently, there are around 1,300 deaths each year caused by the disease. In 1993–1994, diagnosis and treatment of skin cancer was estimated to cost the Australian community substantially more than any other cancer.² Because of its high prevalence and cost to the community, well-established aetiology, and the availability of effective preventive strategies, control of skin cancer has been nominated as a national health priority area.³

Although Australia still has the highest incidence of skin cancer in the world, recent trends provide cause for optimism. The incidence of basal cell carcinoma and melanoma in younger people (under 55), especially among women, have begun to level off and, in some age groups, begun to decline.⁴ The pattern of change is consistent with the trends that would be expected to result from the effect of skin cancer prevention programs undertaken over the last two decades.

IDENTIFYING THE FOCUS FOR SKIN CANCER PREVENTION IN NSW

Unprotected exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation (UVR) continues to be the single most important modifiable risk factor for skin cancer. Consequently, there are substantial health, social and economic benefits from investing in coordinated and strategic skin cancer prevention programs that lead to reductions in population levels of UVR exposure. Based on evidence, the most effective programs are those that combine public education campaigns with policy and environmental strategies that are integrated across state, regional and local levels.⁵

NSW has a good track record in skin cancer prevention programs. The NSW Department of Health and the NSW Cancer Council have a well-established business partnership that has built on many of the health promotion efforts of the past. While early programs concentrated on providing information to encourage early detection, primary prevention strategies became the stronger focus as health promotion was established as an important component of the health system in the 1980s. Although the primary target of early preventive programs was individual behaviour change, goals of recent sun protection programs have broadened to include more sustainable policy, structural and environmental changes supportive of sun protection in a way that is consistent with state of the art public health interventions.⁶

Over the last decade mass media campaigns complemented by strategies to improve structural and environmental support for sun protection in both NSW and Victoria have demonstrated considerable success in improving knowledge, attitudes, and to a lesser degree sun protective behaviours, for quite modest levels of investment.^{7,8} Evaluation of the costs and benefits of preventive programs indicate substantial economic benefits for our health system in investing in skin cancer prevention programs, particularly those that combine media campaigns supported by regional strategies.⁹

Epidemiological evidence indicates that sun exposure during childhood and adolescence makes an important contribution to the lifelong risk of skin cancer. Strategies designed to reduce exposure of young people to UVR are considered to have the greatest potential to reduce skin cancer incidence rates in the long term. As a consequence, skin cancer prevention programs in NSW have focussed their attention on young people, parents, carers, and the settings in which young people spend time outdoors.

GOALS, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND KEY SETTINGS

The *Skin Cancer Prevention Strategic Plan 2001–2005* reflects an ongoing commitment to a coordinated and strategic approach to the prevention of skin cancer in NSW, consistent with *Healthy People 2005*. This is the second planning document jointly developed by the NSW Cancer Council and the NSW Department of Health. It builds on the excellent foundation established by the *Health Promotion Strategic Plan for Skin Cancer Control in New South Wales 1995–2000*, which successfully guided the development and implementation of state and regional skin cancer prevention strategies. Like its forerunner, the *Skin Cancer Prevention Strategic Plan 2001–2005* was refined through extensive consultation with representatives from the area health services, appropriate state government departments and other key stakeholders.

The timeframes within which public health goals are achieved are long-term. The public action taken today to create environments and organisational practices supportive of sun protection and encourage effective sun protection behaviour will pay dividends in 20 or 30 years time in the form of lower skin cancer rates in our population. The long-term goal of the plan is to reduce the incidence of skin cancer and associated morbidity and mortality by reducing population levels of exposure to UVR

The selection of strategies included in the current Strategic Plan was based on a combination of the current understanding of the aetiology of skin cancer, behavioural epidemiology, best practice in health promotion and skin cancer prevention and on the knowledge and experience of health promotion planners and practitioners. A complementary document *Sun Protection: A guide to develop better practice in skin cancer prevention in NSW*,⁵ provides a review of approaches and strategies available for skin cancer prevention and is useful for developing and implementing programs.

The Strategic Plan identifies strategic priorities in terms of target population groups, settings that provide the best opportunities for successful interventions, priority strategies and desirable partnerships to achieve success. The plan identifies three priority populations in order of public health importance:

- children (0–11 years)
- adolescents (12–19 years)
- adults with high intermittent or cumulative exposure.

It acknowledges the vital foundation provided by the sun protection infrastructure and also identifies five key settings:

- early childhood services
- schools
- sport and recreation
- local government
- workplaces.

Strategies proposed in the plan are organised according to their contribution to achieving favourable long-term and intermediate-term outcomes to reducing sun exposure in three broad areas:

- environmental outcomes (policy and structural support for sun protection);
- organisational outcomes (support and capacity for effective sun protection programs);
- community outcomes (positive knowledge, attitudes and practices for sun protection).

To assess the progress against the strategies in the plan, a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework capitalising on both existing monitoring systems and also additional data collection points is proposed.

SUN PROTECTION INFRASTRUCTURE

Reducing the population's exposure to solar UVR, through a combination of mass media campaigns and structural and environmental supports, requires a highly skilled, responsive and well-resourced sun protection infrastructure to steer the programs and strategies to achieve these outcomes.

The sun protection infrastructure in NSW includes policy makers, planners and people working in or contributing to sun protection programs in NSW Department of Health, NSW Cancer Council and the area health services. It also includes other state and local government departments, non-government organisations and private businesses that have the ability to influence and support policy, programs and products relating to sun protection. A conceptual model of the way in which the sun protection infrastructure operates in concert with key stakeholders to reach the priority target groups through the key settings is displayed in Figure 1.

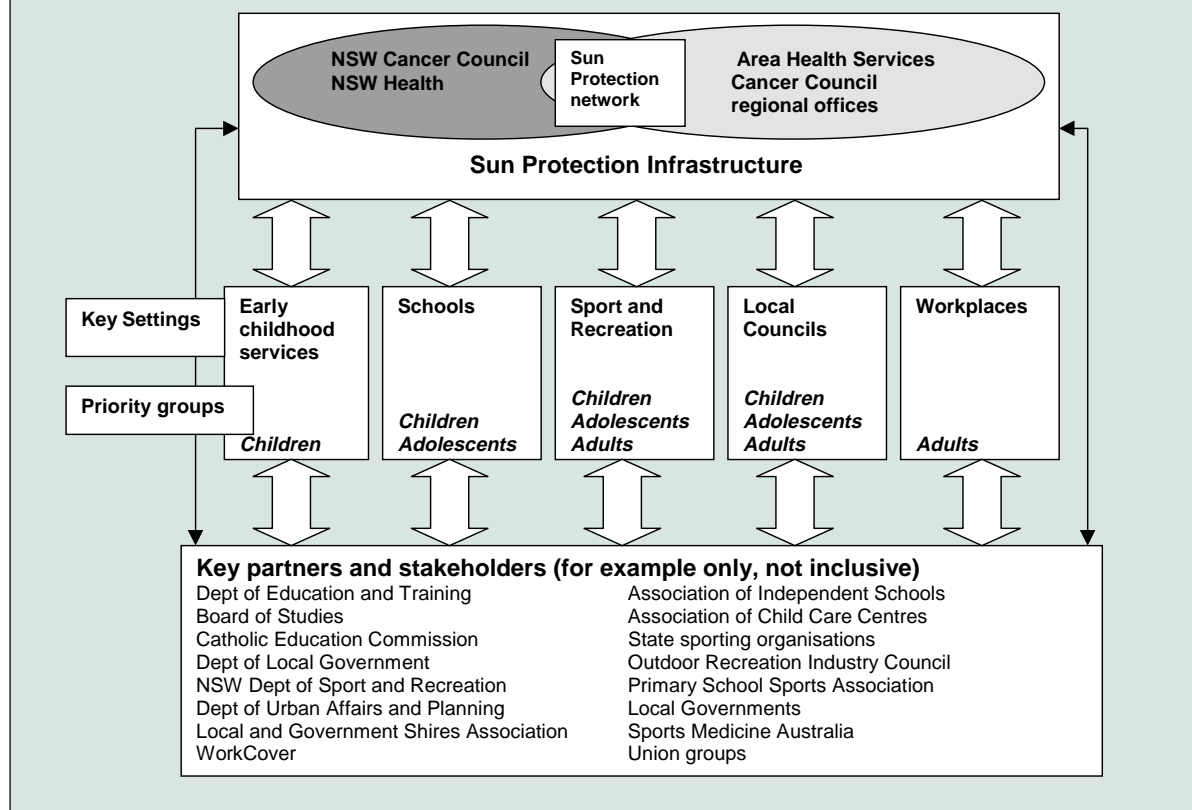
Through existing government and non-government organisations and their networks, there are opportunities to establish regulatory structures to encourage and support implementation of comprehensive sun protection policy and practices into the routine operations of workplaces and community organisations throughout NSW. This same 'infrastructure' has the potential to influence the design of public spaces, workplaces and recreational facilities to favour improved protection from UVR.

Government and peak bodies are able to support workplaces and community organisations' efforts in sun protection through a number of mechanisms, such as legislation, funding, licensing and accreditation requirements.

A network of area health service and NSW Cancer Council staff who work in skin cancer prevention (the NSW Sun Protection Network) was formed in 1996 to provide a forum for information exchange, coordination of state and regional activities, professional development and to foster greater collaboration between network members. The network, jointly administered by NSW Cancer Council and NSW Department of Health, has proved to be a valuable resource in planning, disseminating information and in implementing a range of sun protection strategies throughout NSW. The sun protection network underpins the sun protection infrastructure. In addition, general practitioners, community health nurses and other community workers have also been encouraged to play a role in educating and encouraging the general community to adopt improved sun protection behaviours. Ensuring there are effective and sustainable channels of communication in place is an important role of the sun protection infrastructure.

FIGURE 1

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF SUN PROTECTION INFRASTRUCTURE IN ACTION—TARGETING PRIORITY GROUPS IN FIVE KEY SETTINGS USING CAPACITY BUILDING APPROACHES



CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted key directions and some of the important organisational partnerships, networks and relationships currently in place to implement skin cancer prevention programs in NSW over the next few years. With the strategic framework in place, coordinated action should be well supported and coordinated at all levels. An ongoing commitment by peak government and non-government agencies and their partners should ensure that skin cancer prevention is maintained as a high priority and that the most effective and sustainable public health action is implemented.

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