Skin Cancer: A Persistent Challenge

Within medicine in general and oncology specifically, skin cancer represents a source of significant frustration. While the incidence rates of many other cancers have been declining, skin cancer continues to be on the increase. In the 20-year period from 1986 to 2006, melanoma incidence increased 3.1 percent among men and three percent among women, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The National Cancer Institute now ranks melanoma as the fifth most common cancer. The Skin Cancer Foundation estimates that 3.5 million BCCs and SCCs are diagnosed annually—more than breast, prostate, lung, and colon cancers combined.

Despite the best efforts of dermatologists and public health officials, a reversal of incidence trends in the US seems unlikely. As the population continues to age, an increase in skin cancers is expected. Furthermore, evidence suggests that younger individuals do not practice adequate UV safety. In a 2005 National Cancer Institute survey, only 43 percent of young adults aged 18–24 reported that they used one or more sun protective methods. Among high school students, only 11.7 percent of girls and 6.3 percent of boys reported that they routinely used a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher.

A sobering new study has attempted to quantify the years of potential life lost (YPLL) and lost productivity attributable to skin cancer in young adults. Based on analysis of 16 relevant studies (six from the US, 10 from other industrialized countries), the average number of YPLL per death was found to be approximately 15 for melanoma and 10 for non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC). Costs attributable to melanoma and NMSC ranged from $28.9-39.2 million (US) for morbidity and $1-3.3 billion for mortality.

Given these figures, it comes as no surprise that skin cancer is an area of intense interest for researchers, drug marketers, and clinicians. Recent months have seen exciting developments in skin cancer treatment and diagnosis, and continued innovation is anticipated. In a recent editorial survey of dermatologists, skin cancer ranked as the topic of greatest interest among clinicians, with 76 percent indicating it is “extremely important” to them. In response to reader demand and in light of the rapid rate of evolution in the field, Practical Dermatology is launching Cutaneous Oncology Today. Future editions of this peer-reviewed supplement will continue to highlight new research, discuss diagnosis, and explore treatment of skin cancer and related diseases.

—James Solomon, MD, PhD