

MIAA Endorses Free Melanoma Program for MA High Schools

Daniel Fine was 24 years old and living in California when he surprised his parents with a visit. To their concern, Dan had an ominously large mole on his lower back. He'd first noticed a change in the childhood mole about four or five months before his visit, but attributed it to irritation from the rough fabric of a new computer chair. That assumption and the location of the mole resulted in his subsequent inattention.

However, he promised his parents, Stephen and Gail Fine, that he would see a dermatologist. A week later, he called from California. His dermatologist had told him that the mole was a late-stage melanoma and he would require further treatment. The statistics were frightening; when it spreads internally, melanoma is one of the most malignant and incurable of all cancers. Eventually the disease spread to his liver and lungs and was inoperable. Despite aggressive treatment, the Fines lost their beloved son in 1998 at age 26.

No one in high school or college had ever educated Dan about melanoma or given him any literature. Unfortunately, that situation is typical at most high schools and colleges. To educate people about this deadly disease, the Fines started the Melanoma Education Foundation, a non-profit organization with the mission of saving lives by emphasizing the importance of monthly self-examination of the skin to detect melanoma while it is thin and curable. Their goal is to reach teens and young adults, who are often unaware of melanoma and their vulnerability to it. They also wish to educate parents who, by acting now, can prevent melanoma from affecting their children as adults.

School Programs

At no cost, the foundation will provide a one-hour training session to high school health educators, physical education staff and anyone else suitable to teach students about skin cancer. Each teacher that attends the training receives a teen-narrated video about the dangers of excess sun exposure, and enough early detection bookmarks for every student in the class. The foundation also provides a lesson plan, suggestions for homework assignments, and quiz question/answer material. The training session will be conveniently held at the school.

The MIAA Wellness Department is endorsing this valuable program and recommends that member high schools take advantage of it.

In return for the free service and curriculum, Stephen Fine asks schools to devote one mandatory classroom session to melanoma and early detection, incorporating the program into a graduation requirement such as biology, health or physical education.

Each year, participating schools will get a phone call asking whether they need more bookmarks and whether new health teachers have come aboard. To keep the melanoma program from dying out, the foundation will provide a free follow-up training session when staff changes warrant it.

More New Cases Than HIV

Although it is rare in young children, melanoma occurs in every age group after puberty and is the most common cancer in young adults of ages 25-29. Among women of ages 30-35 the incidence is exceeded only by breast cancer. Overall melanoma is the 6th most common cancer in males and 7th in females. The U.S. incidence of melanoma now exceeds that of new HIV infections; 54,200 new cases were predicted in 2003.

"Because the schools don't teach about it, high school students graduate and enter their twenties without knowing that their vulnerability jumps," said Stephen Fine. "They haven't been told that they have to make some life choices about skin cancer."

By high school graduation, a teenager may have suffered enough sun damage to increase their risk for a lifetime. For that reason, the foundation stresses the importance of early detection.

He said that melanoma is easy to detect yourself at an early stage and can be cured by simple painless removal in a doctor's office. All it takes is a 10 minute monthly skin check.

"People don't realize how common it is and how serious it is," he said. "A typical reaction if you mention melanoma is 'that's just skin cancer, isn't it?' Schools really need to teach their students about it so they'll understand there is a risk - but if they examine themselves once a month, that risk is just about zero. If you catch it early, it's easy to cure."

For more information, call the Melanoma Education Foundation at 1-800-259-1633. The organization's web site www.skincheck.com offers downloadable literature.

CHART:

Ordinary Moles Have All of These Features:

Round or Oval

Sharp, Even Border

Uniform, brown

Less than quarter inch

Smooth or Cauliflower

Even dome shape if mole is raised

Atypical Moles have one or more of these features:

Irregular

Uneven and/or fuzzy

Two or more shades of brown or pink

Quarter inch or more

Pebbled or bumpy

Flat edges with "fried egg" center