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TEENAGERS TO HELP UNCOVER THE GENETIC CAUSES OF SKIN CANCER

WA teenagers are being asked to help local researchers by taking part in a study that could shed new light on how to bring down skin cancer rates.

The study will be undertaken by Matthew Legge, a PhD student supervised by Professor Lyle Palmer at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research's (WAIMR) Laboratory for Genetic Epidemiology and Dr Liz Milne at the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

Professor Palmer said the study would look for possible genetic causes of moles and how they might relate to melanoma, including an initial probe of five genes believed to be linked to melanoma.

"This is an area of research that has been given relatively little attention," said Professor Palmer.

"We know that having a lot of moles is a strong risk factor for melanoma, but there's still a lot of mystery surrounding the genetic causes of moles.

"If we can find out what prompts their development, we might be able to move a step closer to uncovering the genetic causes of skin cancer and that would ultimately boost the chances of discovering more about how to prevent it, and how it can be treated more effectively."

Other established risk factors for melanoma include having a pale complexion, red or blonde hair, skin that freckles, that tans poorly, or is sensitive to the sun and a family history of the disease.

The main environmental risk factor is exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation (UVR).

Professor Palmer said the study would look at links that may exist between particular genes, the number of moles a child has and factors such as skin type and hair colour, as well as the participant's UVR exposure.

"The ultimate goal in putting the genetics of moles and skin cancer under the microscope is that one day we may be able to use genetic testing to predict a person's likelihood of developing this insidious disease," he said.

"Early detection and early intervention are critical if we are to reduce the high rates of melanoma in the WA population."

Teenagers who previously took part in the landmark 'Kidskin' study will be approached to take part in this research.

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The Kidskin study, led by a research team including Dr Liz Milne, followed a cohort of children from their first year of primary school in 1995 to Year 7 in 2001.

The main goal of the study was to see if a school-based programme encouraging children to reduce their exposure to sunlight during the middle of the day would be effective in reducing the number of moles that they develop.

The study found that the children who participated in the Kidskin programme developed fewer moles.

This latest study is supported by the Scott Kirkbride Melanoma Research Centre.

The Centre was established at WAIMR in March to allow researchers to investigate the genetic causes of melanoma.

It has been named in memory of WA golfer Scott Kirkbride who lost his battle with skin cancer last year at the age of 27.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Melanoma is becoming more prevalent and is now the third most common form of cancer in Australia.
- Australia has one of the world's highest rates of melanoma.
- Western Australia has the second highest rate of melanoma in Australia
- There are over 1000 new cases of melanoma diagnosed in Western Australia each year, and it is the cancer most likely to affect 15-39 year olds.
- Melanoma is one of the most preventable forms of cancer.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

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