

Introduction

Sun Protection Outreach Teaching by Students (SPOTS) was created by a group of medical students and faculty (dermatology, education, public health, biostatistics, surgical oncology, cancer research outcomes) from both Saint Louis University and Washington University Medical Schools under the leadership of Stephanie Lickerman, RN, Community Education Director for the Melanoma Hope Network (MHN) who originally developed the program. This program, established through a collaborative effort between the two medical institutions, a school of public health, a community non-profit organization (MHN), and the Rockwood School District, represents the first educational program of its kind that focuses on teenage skin cancer prevention taught by medical and allied health professionals in training.

This comprehensive program aims to teach adolescent students early detection and prevention measures regarding skin cancer in an effort to increase their knowledge and hopefully affect their attitudes and behaviors towards sun protection. SPOTS also aims to educate medical/allied health students in sun protection methods, teaching strategies, and the basics of cutaneous malignancies in order to better prepare them for educating and treating current and future patients.

Skin cancer is a significant and growing problem in our society that presents a major public health challenge for the medical and public health communities. Although it is largely a preventable disease, skin cancer affects more Americans than all other cancers combined and continues to increase in incidence annually. In addition to the alarming statistics, many myths persist in our society that hinder the effectiveness of sun protection methods.

The SPOTS program aims to eliminate many of these myths by teaching adolescent students the facts about sun exposure, the proper use of protective methods, and the influence of societal and peer norms on behavior. Thus, increasing knowledge and awareness to encourage lifestyle choices and behavioral changes to reduce the incidence of skin cancer in tomorrow's society. We targeted this age group because they spend considerable time exposed to ultraviolet radiation, both outdoor and indoor; there were very few available programs for teens on sun protection; and this is the point in most adolescents' lives when the foundation is laid for the development of lifelong behavior patterns.

Through the SPOTS program, medical and allied health students teach good sun protection behaviors and skin cancer detection methods to adolescents during two 50 minute classes or one 85 minute class. These time increments match the class lengths of most middle and high schools on either a regular or block schedule. Part one of the program emphasizes early detection, while part two highlights protection and prevention. The curriculum includes interactive lectures, handouts, worksheets, and educational games; a skin analyzer machine that allows students to visualize the level of their current sun damage; and a short video containing a demonstration of a punch biopsy for a changing mole removal, as well as, the stories of two teenagers who have undergone treatment for melanoma.

This program is designed to present the facts about skin cancer and sun protection to teenagers in an interesting and engaging way, allowing them to make informed choices regarding future behaviors. The SPOTS program has the potential to reduce the incidence of skin cancer in the future, increase awareness within the community about the importance of sun protection, and educate the next generation of physicians in a subject that is often not a required clinical block in U.S. medical school curricula.