

# Stemming the Tide

Jeffrey M. Weinberg, MD

Nanette B. Silverberg, MD

This issue of *Cutis*<sup>®</sup> is dedicated to the important topic of malignant melanoma. The overall incidence of malignant melanoma is rising at an extraordinary rate. As of 2000, it was estimated that 1 in 74 Americans has a lifetime risk of developing malignant melanoma. This represents a 2000% increase from 1930. The initial estimate of melanoma-related deaths from last year was 7700 people (4800 men and 2900 women). As clinicians, we have an important role in the prevention, early detection, and proper and effective treatment of this disease. Here are 5 important steps we can take to limit the negative impact of malignant melanoma.

1. Practice prevention. Because overexposure to UV light is thought to be a major factor in the development of melanoma, we should recommend the following precautions, especially for children: avoiding peak sunlight hours (10 AM until 4 PM), the use of protective clothing, and the regular use of sunscreen. The sunscreen should be a physical block containing either zinc or titanium dioxide or a chemical block with avobenzone, the most effective UVA block.

2. Look for changes. The most important thing we can do for patients is to provide a complete cutaneous examination. We should encourage patients to have full skin checks annually. We also should recommend monthly self-examination of the skin and nails. The important concept here is that clinical change within a lesion is the earliest and most sensitive sign of potential malignant melanoma.

3. Know the risk factors. In addition to examination, it is important to obtain some other historical information from our patients. Do they have a family history of melanoma or dysplastic nevi? Have they had one or more blistering sunburns? Have they noted any lesions that are changing, itching, or bleeding? Familiarity with these and other risk factors will allow us more insight into those of our patients who are at highest risk for melanoma.

4. Educate our patients. We should spend time with patients to alert them to the ABCDEs of melanoma (and learn the ABCDEs if we are unaware). The widespread adoption of the ABCDEs of cutaneous melanoma has helped increase public and physician awareness and thus helped increase the early detection of this entity. In addition, we can provide brochures and patient guides that clearly illustrate the early warning signs of melanomas.

5. Keep up-to-date with cutting-edge treatment. It is important that we are familiar with the proper surgical margins for melanomas of specific thicknesses. In addition, the emergence of sentinel lymph node dissection, interferon alfa for high-risk tumors, and potential vaccines for advanced disease offers us a new array of options in the management of this disease.

Malignant melanoma is an aggressive disease with an increasing incidence. By educating ourselves and our patients, we have the best hope of combating this foe.