

With skin cancer on the rise, local agencies increase efforts

By Karen Hayes
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As a child in Serbia, vacationing on sunny Adriatic beaches each summer, Michael Jovanovic never gave skin cancer a second thought. But now, at 80, he is concerned enough to get two suspicious growths checked out.

"Back then people liked to be brown," said Jovanovic, who now lives in Quincy. "It was considered beautiful and healthy. Only later on you learn it might be beautiful, but it is not healthy."

Jovanovic was one of 186 people from 27 south suburban communities who filled the hallways of South Shore Hospital this month waiting for one of eight volunteer dermatologists to check their skin as part of the South Weymouth hospital's annual free skin cancer detection clinic. Last Wednesday's screening at Quincy Medical Center was attended by 119 people, some from as far as Fall River and Pittsfield.

Summer swimsuit season is

just around the corner. And South Shore Hospital and Quincy Medical Center are just two of many local health agencies offering the latest advice on skin cancer prevention via free skin cancer screenings and lectures in May, designated as Skin Cancer Detection Month by the state Department of Public Health, and in June.

"We are mostly concerned about melanoma because people can die from melanoma," Dr. Glenn Dobecki said between patients at the South Shore Hospital clinic. "The best treatment is early detection."

As awareness increases, more people are using sunscreen and attending clinics such as these, local specialists say. But more needs to be done. Melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, is the fastest increasing cancer in Massachusetts, according to the state Skin Cancer Prevention Program.

More than one million new cases of skin cancer, including

51,400 new cases of melanoma, will be diagnosed in the United States this year, according to American Cancer Society data for 2001. The incidence of melanoma, which will claim 7,800 lives this year, more than tripled among Caucasians between 1980 and 2001.

But the good news is that skin cancer is highly curable when treated in its early stages, and preventable, simply by reducing sun exposure.

South suburban residents are particularly at risk for damaging sunburn because of the area's popular coastal beaches and inland lakes and ponds. Also, because much of the region's population is affluent, many residents also burn during winter vacations to the tropics, increasing skin cancer risk.

Such intermittent sun exposure can be particularly dangerous for children, said Maryellen Maguire-Eisen, a registered nurse and nurse practitioner at South



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/TOM HERDE

Dr. Glenn Dobecki, a dermatologist, examining Roy Johnson of South Weymouth at the annual free skin cancer screening at South Shore Hospital in Weymouth.

Shore Skin Center, with offices in Plymouth and Hingham. Maguire-Eisen, whose husband, Dr. Richard Eisen, is a dermatologist at the center, said one of their melanoma patients is only 15 years old.

Protecting children is especially important because people receive 80 percent of their lifetime ultraviolet exposure before the age of 18, she said, and every blistering sunburn in childhood may double their risk of developing a melanoma. Although our grandparents had a one in 1,500 chance of developing a malignant melanoma, our children have a one in 90 lifetime risk.

Maguire-Eisen has made skin cancer prevention something of a personal crusade. She spoke on sun protection this month at an Oncology Nursing Society workshop and has published a handout on how to perform a skin self-exam.

She also speaks about sun safety in local schools. When her children's Hanover school sent home a cold-weather policy, Maguire-Eisen requested a warm-weather policy to protect students from the sun. When the town was planning to build a playground, she asked that shade be incorporated into its design. She also conducted a study of Hanover High School freshmen, which showed boys do not use sunscreen and do not practice other forms of sun protection.

"They even wear their hats

backward," she said.

Despite increased awareness, misconceptions about skin cancer persist, these health professionals say.

"In the last few years, people have been using more sunscreen than ever before, yet skin cancer continues to be on the rise," Maguire-Eisen said. "We need to do more than use sunscreen."

That includes staying out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Until just a few years ago, health professionals advised avoiding sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

It also includes wearing a so-called

broad spectrum sunscreen, which protects against both burning and tanning ultraviolet A and B rays. It was once thought only burning rays were harmful. Sunscreen is not recommended for infants younger than 6 months. They should be kept covered and in the shade.

And although dark-complected people have less chance of developing skin cancer, they are not immune. Melanomas on palms, soles of feet, and in nail beds can be particularly lethal, said Dr. Lionel Bercovitch, an associate professor at Brown University Medical School, who led the recent skin screening at South Shore Hospital. Anyone can develop skin cancer on any part of the body, not just those parts exposed to the sun, he and others said.

Although parents today tend to

sponsoring its annual free skin cancer screening with local dermatologists from 5:30 to 8 p.m. on June 28. For more information, call 800-750-5343.

A skin cancer lecture sponsored by Brockton Hospital Community Health Programs will be held at 9:30 a.m. on June 26. Contact the Striar Jewish Community Center in Stoughton at 781-341-2016, ext. 128, to register.

For information on upcoming skin screenings at Tobey Hospital in Wareham, call Dermatology and Allergy Associates at 508-997-0121 or check the Tobey Hospital Web site at www.southcoast.org.

Brockton Hospital, Quincy Medical Center, and South Shore Hospital in Weymouth are some of the local health agencies that offer yearly free skin cancer screenings in May. For information about next year's screenings, call South Shore Hospital at 781-340-8000, Brockton Hospital at 508-941-7979, or Quincy Medical Center at 617-376-4018.

For a free tip card on preventing skin cancer, call the state health department's Skin Cancer Prevention Program at 617-624-5441.

For more information on skin cancer prevention, see these Web sites: American Academy of Dermatology at www.aad.org; the American Cancer Society at www2.cancer.org/skinGuide/index.html; the Massachusetts Department of Public Health skin cancer site at www.state.ma.us/dph/cancerct/skin-can.htm.

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dren, teenagers may not be getting the message. New solutions include everything from sunscreen sprays and gels for teenagers and men who hate the feel of sticky creams to sun protective clothing with built-in SPF's and a laundry additive that increases clothing's sun protection factor.

Some believe getting a tan before a tropical vacation is beneficial. But tanning booths are as harmful to skin as the sun, according to the American Cancer Society. Local health professionals interviewed advised against them.

In her workshops, Maguire-Eisen advises nurses to help patients thinking about sunlight perceive it as ultraviolet radiation.

"I love the sun. I love the beach," she said. "I think you can