

Subject: Submission to Inquiry into Skin Cancer in Australia
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Susan Gregg

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House of Representative Committee Inquiry into Skin Cancer in Australia

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Dear Committee

RE: SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO SKIN CANCER IN AUSTRALIA – SUSAN GREGG

I am the mother of a 7 year old girl who has extremely fair skin. I also have fair skin and we live in the tropics in Cairns, Far North Queensland where the UV level remains at “extreme” virtually all year round. My daughter’s paternal grandfather died of Carcinoma in 2010 and her maternal grandparents are constantly having skin cancers removed. Accordingly, managing exposure to the sun and minimising the risk of skin cancer is something in which I have a keen interest.

My daughter commenced school in Cairns in 2011 and I have been absolutely astounded and frustrated at the ignorance and practices of many of the schools in the area when it comes to protecting children from harmful exposure to the sun and skin cancer. I am concerned that these same attitudes and practices may well prevail in schools across Queensland and perhaps also the rest of Australia.

While I am very supportive of the attention that is being given to the dangers of using sun tanning beds and the idea of banning them, I submit that by far the biggest issue regarding skin cancer in Australia is the attitude and practices of our schools in protecting children from harmful exposure to the sun.

I further submit that the single biggest thing that should be done to improve the situation regarding skin cancer in Australia is to **compel** the schools (both state and independent) to take far more meaningful steps to protect their students from harmful exposure to the sun than is currently the case.

The schools all seem to have a “No hat, no play” policy. However, with many of them, it appears that that is the beginning and end of what the school does in terms of protecting their students from harmful exposure to the sun. In the tropical regions of

Australia, at least, this is simply insufficient and our children and future generations of Australians are being put at unnecessary risk of developing skin cancer in later life.

The schools seem to be very conscious of the duty of care they owe to their students to keep them safe from various risks and schools must manage those risks to avoid student harm and being sued. But when it comes to skin cancer, the damage only becomes apparent 30 or 40 years later, so by then, it is unlikely that anyone would be in a position to sue the school they attended as a child for causing or contributing to the harm. I cannot help but think that this contributes to the poor attitude of many schools towards the risks associated with sun exposure as compared to risks where damage is immediately apparent.

In my short time of dealing with schools in the Cairns region regarding my daughter I have experienced the following:

- I was told by two schools that my daughter would not be able to wear a long sleeve school uniform because the official school uniform had short sleeves.

- I understand that the tiny cloth hats worn by the Prep students at one particular school do not comply with Australian standards. (These same Prep students had their physical education lessons scheduled between 12 noon and 2pm and were often to be seen running about an oval with no shade in temperatures well in excess of 30 degrees Celsius with the UV level at extreme.)

- Physical education lessons are routinely scheduled to suit the timetable of the school rather than having regard to the welfare of the students so that young children are out on ovals in extreme heat and with UV levels at extreme. (In these conditions, it doesn't matter how much sunscreen is applied or what type of hat is worn. Children should simply not be out in the direct sun in such conditions, and to do otherwise is reckless.)

- Children suffering dehydration and heat stroke after participating in events such as cross country runs and obstacle courses scheduled when it is very hot and when UV levels are extreme;

- Children suffering sunburn as a result of being required to sit or stand in the direct sun for lengthy periods for things such as fire drills, assembly or choir practice;

- One school in Cairns installed playground equipment for its Grade 1 to Grade 3 students and did not have any form of shade cover whatsoever over the playground equipment for the best part of a year;

• One assistant principal in Cairns asked me “If your daughter has never actually been sunburnt, how do you know she is susceptible to sunburn? Maybe you should just send her out in the sun and see how it goes?” (This was after the assistant principal had been advised of our family history of skin cancer. My daughter was sitting in the room at the time and has skin so obviously fair that her appearance is close to albino. The question asked demonstrates the general attitude towards the risk of sun exposure that we have had to deal with in the school system.)

I submit the following:

1. Schools ought to be **compelled** to keep **all** lessons (including physical education/ exercise lessons) **undercover** once the temperature or UV index reaches a prescribed level. It is simply reckless and irresponsible to have children running around on ovals in extreme conditions – even if they are wearing a hat and sunscreen. Many schools now have undercover sports facilities, school halls or multipurpose facilities which would accommodate this. Activities such as cross country runs, obstacle courses, swimming carnivals and sports carnivals must be scheduled to occur when the temperature and UV index do not exceed a prescribed level – even if this means that they must occur before or after usual school hours.

2. Where a particular school uniform is compulsory, all students who wish to wear a long sleeve version of that uniform ought to be entitled to do so. Similarly, where a hat forms part of a compulsory school uniform, students who wish to wear a broad brim or legionnaire version ought to be entitled to do so. These matters ought not to be left to the discretion of the school.

3. All hats forming part of a compulsory school uniform must comply with Australian standards. Minimum compulsory standards should also be set for the UV rating of fabric used in school uniforms.

4. All playground equipment at schools must have shade cover that give students good protection from the sun at the time they are likely to be using the equipment. (Many shade covers appear inadequate in terms of the protection they offer or do not provide shade at the time when the children are playing there.) No new playground equipment should be made available for students to play on at a school without an effective shade cover being in place. These requirements ought to be mandatory – not a voluntary thing for schools to decide whether to comply with.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->5. <!--[endif]-->Education on skin cancer and the risks associated with harmful exposure to the sun must be ramped up within schools. It would seem that many people (adults and children alike) still fail to recognise the risks associated with exposure to the sun. It appears that myths still abound – such as there is no point using sunscreen or wearing a hat on a cloudy day because you can't get sun burnt.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->6. <!--[endif]-->There is a very effective sunscreen on the market in Australia called “Actinica”. At present it is very expensive – around \$55 to \$70 for one tube. I understand that the cost of this sunscreen is subsidised by the taxpayer but only for people who have a formal diagnosis of albinism. I submit that it would be of assistance in reducing the number of people diagnosed with skin cancer if this subsidy were extended to people at high risk of skin cancer either because they have a family history of skin cancer or otherwise upon the recommendation of a general medical practitioner. I submit that the cost of subsidising this sunscreen for high risk individuals would be well and truly more than offset by the savings to the health care system resulting from associated skin cancer prevention.

Skin cancer is a significant problem in Australia and diagnosis of skin cancer is on the rise. This will continue to be the case unless the problem is addressed at a grass roots level within our school system. It makes good sense to ban the use of tanning beds, but if our children have been subjected to harmful sun exposure during their school years, it will, at least in some cases, matter not if they ever use a tanning bed. They will still be at significant risk of developing skin cancer in later life. It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to stop this. I hope that the work of your Committee will go some way towards achieving this.

Yours sincerely,

Susan Gregg

cc. Warren Entsch, Member for Leichhardt