

Flayed by too much paradise

By Ruth Ostrow

GLORIOUS summer days that went on forever. That's how I remember my childhood in Melbourne. We were the lucky ones, or so our immigrant parents kept telling us - free, living in paradise. A million miles away from the wars and suffering that ravaged their lives. And so we Aussie kids played, uninhibited, wild as the wind, running over sand, riding bikes down the streets, hatless, shoeless, fearless.

That was then. Today, I'm sitting in fear, with four other women in a surgery waiting to have a growth removed that is suspected to be a fast-growing skin cancer.

The woman next to me, in her late 30s, has a suspected melanoma on her leg. The woman in the corner is about fortysomething and has bandages all over her face from potentially dangerous moles that have been removed.

"How did we know?" laments one of the women when I tell her that I'd like to write a story about the shocking incidence of skin cancer in this country.

"It's the new common cold," says my doctor, on referring me for plastic surgery. "Don't stress about it." But it is stressful. The endless pain and fear that so many Australians have to endure each year is underplayed.

And the real statistics are alarming: Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. One out of every two Australians will develop skin cancer at some stage during their lives. Over 720,000 skin cancer removal operations take place in Australia annually, at a cost to the federal Government of over \$300 million. Melanoma kills about 1000 people a year.

"We didn't know. Who knew? We used to put baby oil on and bake ourselves till we were red raw. The redder the better because it meant you would develop a tan," says one of the women, shaking her head and telling me about the people she knows who've been disfigured by growths.

I feel vulnerable and sorry. Sorry that I thought it couldn't happen to me. Sorry for all the frying my skin had to suffer so that I would look like Malibu Barbie. Sorry I continue to worship the sun even now that the ozone layer is badly torn.

The nurse comes out. It's my turn to face the music. Confront the past and the future in one terrifying swoop. The doctor agrees that the growth has to come off my face. Explains the perils of plastic surgery, the risks, the facts about skin cancer including that a small percentage of non-pigmented growths can be melanoma - which scares me witless - and sends me home to explore my mortality.

At home I turn on the TV to forget. On the news bombs are dropping. Wars, famine, disasters plague other places.

Here in Australia we are safe. We live in the lucky country. Or so we've been told. Yet every day there is someone having to deal with the consequences of too much paradise. Too much sunshine. Life outside the bomb shelter.

We thankfully don't have to suffer the tragedy of war. But we live in a country at war nonetheless - with the sun, with a delicate ecological system that we are turning hostile by our neglect.

A week later, I have the tumour removed. It isn't cancer. I'm so relieved I cry. But I'm writing this for the others in the waiting room, today and tomorrow, who have to endure the bad news, and have their bodies cut and cut again, burned, stitched and disfigured, under the threat of malignancy.

And what I want to say is this. It's too late to turn back the clock and save those of us who were burned by ignorance years before. But it's not too late to prevent the same thing happening again.

If skin cancer is the new common cold, then it's time to awaken from the blissful innocence we all grew up with on those summer days of our youth. We live under damaged skies. There's a hole in the protective ozone layer. We can't afford to be apathetic about it.

A recent survey revealed that Australians rank the environment as our fifth most important social issue, after (in order) health, crime, education and unemployment. Only 9 per cent of people rate the environment as the most important social issue. And yet our health cannot be guaranteed if we continue to brutalise Mother Nature.

By not putting hats on us so many years ago, our parents unknowingly condemned us to this. By standing quietly by while the Government baulks at Kyoto, and as we continue to damage our planet and consume without consciousness, we are condemning our children to the same fate we are now facing - if not worse.

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