



## COMMENTARY

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# Don't let patients tan their lives away

To most teenage girls, nothing goes better with summer, sun, and flip-flops than the perfect tan. Perhaps this is why so many girls visit tanning salons to work on achieving that bronzed skin.

My mother was one of those sun-worshippers, and I always envied her deep tans. As I got older, she would let me come along to the tanning bed with her. At first it was just before special occasions such as a wedding or the prom, and then it became every April or May, "to get ready for summer." Everyone has heard at one time or another that too much sun exposure can be unhealthy—but no one ever warned my mother or me just how dangerous it could be.

At the age of 22, my worst fear had come true. But my melanoma was caught early, and I am one of the few lucky ones.

I graduated from college and began working as an inpatient oncology nurse. I will never forget when I saw my first patient die from stage IV melanoma. I vowed on that day that I would never lie down again in a tanning bed.

But even at the age of 22, it was still too late. My boyfriend pointed out a mole on my hip that he noticed was bigger than it used to be, oddly shaped, and changing colors. I called my dermatologist to schedule a biopsy. Two days after Christmas, in 2010, he called me to tell me the results were in: I had melanoma.

My worst fear had come true. The next few months were a whirlwind of surgeries, PET scans, and trips to the oncologist. Fortunately, my melanoma was caught very early, and I am ecstatic to say that I am cancer-free. I am one of the few lucky ones.

Many states now require parental permission for teens to use tanning beds. But do parents really understand what they are consenting to? Girls following in my footsteps will come up with 100 reasons for their parents to grant permission, but we as health-care providers need to give parents one really big reason to say no.

Tanning beds emit two different types of ultraviolet (UV) rays: UVA and UVB. The UVB rays are responsible for more superficial damage, such as sunburns. UVA rays are what cause deeper damage to the skin. These beds emit 10 to 15 times more UVA than the sun.

UV rays have been found to be so destructive that the International Agency for Research on Cancer has labeled them "carcinogenic to humans," which puts them in the same category as tobacco, mustard gas, and plutonium ([monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/index.php](http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/index.php), accessed April 15, 2012). After recurrent damage, the cells in the body start to mutate, turning into cancer.

The three most common skin cancers are basal cell, squamous cell, and melanoma. Melanoma accounts for only 5% of all skin cancers, but it is the most dangerous.

Be sure your patients understand that cancer that grows on the skin is no less devastating than cancer that grows in the lungs, bones, or brain. One person dies every 62 minutes from melanoma, which is the second most common cancer in females aged 15 to 29 years ([www.skincancer.org/skin-cancer-information/skin-cancer-facts](http://www.skincancer.org/skin-cancer-information/skin-cancer-facts), accessed April 15, 2012). Tanning increases a girl's risk of melanoma by 75% ([www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic\\_info/indoor\\_tanning.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic_info/indoor_tanning.htm), accessed April 15, 2012).

We tell our kids that smoking is bad, that alcohol is dangerous...but we fail to tell them about the dangers of tanning beds. Health professionals need to help parents help their teenagers understand the long-term risks of tanning beds so these youths can ultimately save their beautiful skin—and their lives. ■