Nursing Issues in Managing Skin Cancer in the Year 2000

Carol Reed Ash, EdD, RN, FAAN

An estimation that a skin cancer of some type will have developed in more than one million Americans in the year 1996, with 38,300 of these being malignant melanomas, raises the management of skin cancer in the year 2000 to an increasing level of priority for nurses. Estimated lifetime risk for an American having invasive melanoma is projected be 1 in 75 by the year 2000, an increase from the 1 in 1,500 reported in 1930. This shows a consistent annual increase in incidence of approximately 6%, with melanoma ranked behind only lung cancer in percentage increase in deaths per year.

To be responsive to the increasing problem, a number of challenges must be addressed, including environmental, societal, educational, and public health policies. Environmental issues such as stratospheric ozone depletion, which allows more intense UV light to reach the earth’s surface, may not be something nurses can change, but we can contribute significantly to societal, educational, and public health issues. A collaborative effort of all health care workers is needed to bring about the behavior changes necessary to decrease the rapidly escalating skin cancer statistics.

Public awareness campaigns need to be developed to focus attention on the problem and to increase the level of knowledge about what causes cancer and how individuals can protect themselves. A recent national survey revealed that only one third of Americans know that melanoma is a skin cancer and only 50% know it is even a cancer. While dermatologists may be the best diagnosticians of malignant melanoma, most people are initially seen in the primary care setting. A primary care physician or a nurse practitioner is often the first contact for the patient, and sometimes the diagnosis is secondary to presentation of another problem or symptom. Education programs to increase the skill and expertise of the professional practitioner, as well as to increase emphasis on skin cancer prevention and detection activities.

GatorSHADE, a community education program developed to address sun protection issues, is an example of a way to increase public awareness of the critical skin cancer prevention message. Designed to involve both children and their parents in the learning process, it utilizes sun protective hats, teaching cards, and sun screen to facilitate learning. GatorSHADE demonstrates how multiple disciplines working in a collaborative effort can address a serious health care problem.

The challenges in meeting the needs are great, but they can be met. They include improvement in early detection rates, integration of health promotion and early detection into professional education, and practice and integration of health promotion and detection at an early age and throughout life.

References