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MEDIA RELEASE

Tackling non-melanoma skin cancer in New Zealand

Thursday 15 September, 2011

The high and increasing incidence of non-melanoma skin cancers poses an immediate and ongoing challenge to the New Zealand health sector, a study in the latest issue of the *ANZ Journal of Surgery* has found.

Non-melanoma skin cancers (NMSC) are the most commonly diagnosed group of cancers in New Zealand. In 2006, NMSC was estimated to have cost the New Zealand health-care system NZ\$58 million, representing 8% of total expenditure for the treatment of all cancers and making it one of the most expensive cancers to treat. Despite its frequency and cost implications, the incidence of NMSC within New Zealand is currently unknown.

One of the study's authors, Professor Swee T. Tan, a surgeon at the Plastic, Maxillofacial and Burns Unit at Hutt Hospital, said the New Zealand Cancer Registry abandoned mandatory reporting of the most common forms of NMSC in 1958 because of incomplete reporting and a lack of resources to manage the large number of these cancers.

"The lack of data in New Zealand has prevented effective service planning and delivery. This is reflected by the implementation of a variety of unproven and inconsistent primary care models for skin lesion removal by different District Health Boards within the country," Professor Tan said.

"The incidence of NMSC has been increasing globally, with Australia recently reporting a 1.5-fold increase over the past 17 years. Given that Australia and New Zealand share similar latitude, sun exposure levels, population skin types and other risk factors, it is conceivable that this increase may have also occurred within New Zealand.

"Stronger epidemiological data is needed to support the implementation of an integrated and sustainable service that addresses New Zealand's NMSC burden. This study aimed to provide an analysis of the current incidence of NMSC based on longitudinal data derived from pathology reports from within the Central Region of New Zealand during the period 1997–2007," he said.

The retrospective study examined the pathology records of 26 411 patients who underwent surgical excision for 54 004 NMSC lesions which were histologically confirmed, over a 10-year period from 1 January, 1997 to 1 January, 2007, within the Central Region of New Zealand. The annual increase in NMSC incidence was calculated at 4.1% per year.

"New Zealand has one of the highest rates of NMSC in the world and its increasing incidence underscores the importance of developing and implementing a national health-care delivery model, and of a commitment to continued monitoring of the problem," Professor Tan said.

The *ANZ Journal of Surgery*, now in its 80th year and published by Wiley-Blackwell, is the pre-eminent surgical journal published in Australia, New Zealand and the South-East Asian region. The Journal is dedicated to the promotion of outstanding surgical practice, and research of contemporary and international interest.

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