Media Release

Under Embargo until
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Close to half of all melanoma deaths are from atypical spots that are sometimes overlooked

Medical researchers have found that close to half of deaths caused by melanoma involve relatively unusual presentations of the disease that frequently go completely unrecognised by patients and their doctors until it’s too late.

The research, being presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Australasian College of Dermatologists in Melbourne this week, shows that while less frequently pigmented nodular type melanomas comprise less than 15% of melanomas – they, nevertheless, are responsible for 43% of all melanoma deaths. Deaths from nodular melanoma and other unusual non-pigmented presentations, add up to about 48% of all deaths from this skin cancer.

The findings have led to calls for health care practitioners to familiarise themselves with how to differentiate these visually less suspicious but deadly skin cancers from benign moles, common skin tumours and everyday inflammations, such as pimples, so that more lives can be saved.

The most common melanomas look like an ugly mole and are unevenly and darkly-pigmented and changing in shape or colour. This is true of most ‘superficial spreading type’ melanomas – 77% of which are suspected to be melanoma by the doctor at the time of removal.

But deadly nodular melanomas present as a symmetrical shape changing red to brown in colour. They look unlike common melanomas – and to an untrained eye – can easily be overlooked. Currently, only about 41% of nodular melanomas are accurately suspected to be melanoma at the time of removal.

According to dermatologist, Associate Professor John Kelly, who is presenting the research findings at the 47th ASM, health care practitioners and their patients need to be aware that the forms of melanoma currently responsible for killing disproportionately high numbers of melanoma patients in the State of Victoria, and across the rest of Australia, often don’t look like melanoma to those checking a person’s skin.

“Lack of pigmentation is a key reason for failure to recognise these unusual presentations as melanoma.

“The research shows that 31% of nodular melanomas showed no pigmentation and looked red in colour.
Others show only small amounts of pigmentation. Four percent of superficial spreading melanomas lacked pigmentation and none were suspected by the doctor as melanoma. Lack of pigmentation was the strongest association of failure to suspect melanoma.

“In addition to lack of recognition of nodular melanoma, another contributing factor to death rates is rapid growth, with nodular melanoma growing, in depth, at 4 times the rate of other melanomas.

“If we are to succeed in further reducing rates of death from melanoma we must promote awareness among health care practitioners of this unusual presentation.

“A helpful feature of all melanomas is that they are changing at a rate that is detectable over months. Putting emphasis on the need to know about change will help in the detection of unusual melanomas and non-pigmented melanomas.

“Spots that are stable for more than a year are almost certainly harmless whereas changes that occur over days or a few weeks are likely to be inflammation or infection and should settle again within a month,” Associate Professor Kelly said.

The President of the Australasian College of Dermatologists, Stephen Shumack, said the research findings served to further underscore the importance of health care practitioners familiarising themselves with the characteristics of atypical melanomas and to know when to refer a patient to a dermatologist for expert opinion.

- Ends -

The 47th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Australasian College of Dermatologists will be held at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC), 1 Convention Centre Place, South Wharf – from Sunday the 18th of May to Wednesday the 21st of May, 2014.

For all media enquiries, including arranging media access to the ASM and for all media interviews, please phone Peter Cassuben on mobile: 0417 980 009