British Photodermatology Group Position Statement:

Sunbeds

The British Photodermatology Group (BPG) and the British Association of Dermatologists (BAD) advocate for a complete ban on commercial sunbeds in the United Kingdom to protect public health and reduce the incidence of skin cancer and eye disease.

Background:

• Ultraviolet (UV) radiation, including that emitted by sunbeds, has been classified as carcinogenic to humans by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.[1]

• Sunbed use is associated with significant increased risk of melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers, particularly for those who start using sunbeds at a young age.[2, 3]

• Despite existing regulations in the UK restricting sunbed use for under-18s, compliance and enforcement is inadequate. A complete ban is the only way to ensure young people are protected from the significant health risks associated with sunbed use.

• Several countries including Australia and Brazil have already implemented successfully total bans on commercial sunbeds. The Republic of Ireland is currently working towards legislation implementing a ban on solaria too. The UK should follow their lead in prioritizing public health over commercial interests.

Key Evidence:

Cancer Risk:

• Sunbed use before age 35 increases lifetime melanoma risk by as much as 75%.[4]

• Regular sunbed use in all users is associated with a 20% increased risk of melanoma.[5]

• The risk of squamous cell carcinoma is more than doubled in sunbed users compared to non-users.[6]

• It is estimated that sunbed use causes over 450,000 non-melanoma skin cancer cases and 10,000 melanoma cases annually in the US, Europe and Australia combined.[6]

• There are 17,500 new melanoma cases in the UK per year and 2300 deaths. 6% of these are estimated to be caused by sunbeds – roughly 100 deaths per year.[7]

• Over the past 30 years, malignant melanoma skin cancer incidence has roughly tripled in the UK.[7]

• Epidemiological studies have found an increased risk of ocular melanoma with sunbed use, especially for those who started artificial tanning before 20 years of age.[5, 8]

Young People at Risk:

• Young people, particularly women, are vulnerable to the harms of artificial tanning.[9, 10]

• A recent survey demonstrated that up to 28% of 16-65 year olds in the UK have used a sunbed.[9] This is an increase on previously published survey data in UK adults.[11-13]

• Early sunbed use is associated with the highest increase in skin cancer risk.[2, 3, 14]

• Sunbed use is addictive and associated with smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and other unhealthy behaviours.[15-17]

Lack of Health Benefits:
• There are no proven health benefits from sunbed use that cannot be obtained more safely through other means.
• Claims of benefits like vitamin D production are not supported by evidence and do not outweigh the risks.[18, 19]

Ineffectiveness of Current Regulations:
• Existing age restrictions and guidelines have proven difficult to enforce effectively.[20]
• Studies show poor compliance with regulations by sunbed operators.[1, 21, 22]
• Self regulation has proven ineffective: Only 16% of sunbed operators in Northern Ireland are currently members of the voluntary Sunbed Association.[23]
• This situation is mirrored across the UK where local authorities report that licensing sunbeds has proved impossible to implement.[20]
• A complete ban is the most straightforward way to eliminate this preventable cancer risk.

Economic Impact:
• Skin cancer treatment places a significant burden on the NHS.
• A ban would likely be cost-effective by reducing future healthcare expenditures related to skin cancer treatment.[24, 25]
• The annual cost to the health system for avoidable skin cancer cases and deaths due to sunbed use is estimated to be in the millions of pounds.[24, 25]

Public Health Benefits of a Ban:

1. Cancer Prevention: A ban would prevent thousands of skin cancer cases annually in the UK, including life-threatening melanomas.[5]

2. Protection of Young People: It would eliminate access to a known carcinogen for young people who are most vulnerable to the harms.[9]

3. Healthcare Cost Savings: Reducing skin cancer incidence would result in significant savings for the NHS in treatment costs.[24, 25]

4. Clear Public Health Message: A ban would send an unambiguous message about the dangers of artificial tanning and help shift cultural attitudes to suntanning in general.

5. Simplified Enforcement: A complete ban is more straightforward to implement and enforce than complex regulations.

Cost-Effectiveness Analysis:
A cost-effectiveness analysis of implementing a nationwide ban on commercial indoor tanning combined with a public information campaign in England found:
• Reductions of 4.8% in melanoma cases (n=1,206), 4.6% in melanoma deaths (n=207) and 3.3% in numbers of keratinocyte cancers (n=3,987) over the lifetime of the 2019 cohort of 18-year-olds.[24]
• An additional 497 quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) with a cost-saving to NHS England of £697,858.[24]
• An incremental net benefit of £10.6 million and a net health benefit of 530 QALYs.

• At a cost-effectiveness threshold of £20,000 per QALY, there is a 99% likelihood of the intervention being cost-effective.[24]

Implementation Considerations:

•There are an estimated 5200 tanning shops in the UK, with a higher density in deprived areas. There are hotspots in the Northwest and Northeast of England.

• Provide a transition period for businesses to adapt and offer support for shifting to safer services like spray tanning.

• Implement strong enforcement mechanisms and penalties for non-compliance.

• Pair the ban with public education campaigns on the risks of UV exposure and importance of sun protection.[24, 26, 27]

• Consider restrictions on private sunbed ownership and use to prevent shifting the risk.

• Empower local authorities to enforce the ban, with powers to inspect premises and issue fixed penalty notices.

•The success of the banning of sunbeds in Australia provides a model for us to copy.[27]

Public Support:

A survey by Cancer Research UK suggested that 90% of the public supported a ban on under 18s using sunbeds. 77% of dermatologist support a ban in the UK and 94% agree that unregulated tanning salons contribute to skin cancer cases.[28, 29]

Conclusion:

Artificial tanning poses an unnecessary and preventable cancer risk, particularly to young people. Existing regulations have proven inadequate in protecting public health. A complete ban on commercial sunbeds is justified and necessary to reduce skin cancer incidence in the UK. We urge policymakers to take decisive action to protect public health by implementing a total ban on commercial sunbeds across the UK. This evidence-based, cost-effective policy would prevent needless suffering, save lives, and reduce healthcare costs.

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