

Skin Cancer in Eastern Australia



Aims: 1) to learn more about how skin cancer is diagnosed and managed among the high-risk population of Eastern Australia and 2) to build my confidence in differentiating between benign and malignant conditions 3) take part in a dermatology research project

Objectives: 1) spend time with leading Brisbane dermatologists and epidemiologists and 2) take part in the data collection and write-up of a systematic review investigating the association between dietary omega-3 fatty acids and skin cancer.

Background:

I am currently working in the plastic surgery department at the JR Hospital, Oxford. Among both inpatients and outpatients, the diagnosis and management of skin cancers forms a significant part of the caseload. Often patients present late, sometimes due to a lack of awareness regarding skin cancer, or hesitancy to have it “checked out”, but sadly, sometimes due to delays in diagnosis. Good doctors are quick to spot signs of malignancy but personally I don’t feel that the limited time devoted to dermatology at medical school prepared me to recognise with confidence manifestations in the skin.

The project:

My colleague and I travelled to Brisbane in November 2012 (their summertime), where there is a 2.5 x higher incidence of keratinolytic cancer (BCCs and SCCs) than the UK. As a result not only is there a greater awareness of these conditions and more doctors specialising in their management, but also a huge amount of research taking part into its prevention. We were based in the Queensland Institute of Medical Research (QIMR) under the supervision of Prof. Adele Green, an acknowledged world leading expert in skin cancer. Some days worked on a systematic review and meta-analysis looking into dietary omega-3 intake and the incidence of BCCs, SCCs and Melanoma, based on the work we had been doing in the UK; some days we spent with Dr Mileham Hayes, a clinician and pioneer in diagnosing and treating both benign and malignant conditions.

Outcome and reflection:

The trip was a great success. By the end of the second week we had seen a large number of cutaneous pathologies, my confidence at identifying them had increased and I am now much better at identifying the worrying signs and knowing which ones need further investigation. The research we undertook at the QIMR was a real eye-opener. We wrote over 5000 words and submitted a 3rd draft of the review, which will hopefully appear in the BMJ next year. I learnt a great deal about the process of putting together a systematic review (which I hadn’t done before), and also saw what can be achieved in a relatively short space of time given access to the right resources.

Both Mileham and Adele were inspiring supervisors and we have formed close and hopefully long-lasting personal and professional relationships, indeed, we have already been speaking about further collaborations in 2013. As a result of this project I am certain that I would like to incorporate research into my practice but realise that I don’t want to sacrifice my clinical skills or lose patient contact, which is very important to me; I now feel better equipped to do so as I approach Core Training and the next stage in my career.