

Tanning bed bill not based on reliable science: industry

Last Updated: Sunday, February 7, 2010 | 1:09 PM ET [Comments61](#)[Recommend22](#)

The Canadian Press

Tanning salon operators say proposed federal legislation that would warn consumers of the cancer risks of tanning is political grandstanding and they are instead calling on the provinces to help regulate operating standards in the industry.

The Joint Canadian Tanning Association also denies there is any scientific evidence to show tanning beds cause melanoma or skin cancer.

"We don't think the science even comes anywhere near supporting such a notion," said association president Doug McNabb.

"We think it's a little grandstanding politically."

McNabb was referring to a proposed private member's bill that Conservative MP James Bezan says he will introduce in the House of Commons in March.

"I'm strictly talking about a consumer awareness campaign of labelling the risks so that those who are using a tanning salon, especially those under 18, are aware that their risks to a carcinogenic exposure are greatly escalated when they are in an artificial tanning system," Bezan said.

The proposed bill would require radiation warning labels on tanning beds that draw a clear link between ultraviolet rays and skin cancer. It would also ensure the labels would be large and placed where the user can clearly see them.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organization, says anyone who begins using tanning devices before the age of 30 increases their risk of cancer by 75 per cent.

"Any tanning increases your risk of cancer," said Aaron Levo, director of public issues for the Canadian Cancer Society, "including tanning beds."

The Canadian Cancer Society and the World Health Organization would go further than the bill, banning those under 18 from using tanning beds altogether.

The tanning association would prefer a less stringent rule — that parents of those under 16 would have to come to the salon and sign an approval form.

"Banning minors from professional salons will only make the problem of overexposure worse," said McNabb.

Nothing will stop teenagers from getting a tan, and they are better off tanning in a salon with professionals overseeing them than in the backyard unsupervised or using inexpensive, unregulated tanning units at home, he said.

McNabb estimates about two to three per cent of salon clients are under 18 and less than half a per cent are under 16.

Health Canada regulates standards for the manufacture of indoor tanning equipment and provides operating

guidelines for tanning salons in Canada, the association notes.

While the industry would like to remain self-governing when it comes to how the equipment is used, if regulations are coming it would like to be a part of the process of developing them.

In addition to having parents of children under 16 sign approval forms the industry is proposing operator training standards, including skin typing and exposure procedures, and facility requirements that include "remote timing" controls which allow only certified operators to set exposure times.

The association says professional salons already impose such standards voluntarily.

Last year, the WHO elevated tanning devices to its highest risk category and called them "carcinogenic to humans."

"It is known that young people who get burnt from exposure to UV will have a greater risk of developing melanoma later in life, and recent studies demonstrate the direct link between the use of sunbeds and cancer," reads a statement on the WHO's website.

But the tanning association says skin type rather than age that is the most important factor in determining whether tanning is harmful. It does not recommend that those with fair skin use tanning beds, regardless of age.

The Canadian Cancer Society would also like to see all of the tanning industry regulated, as well as requiring a licence for UV-emitting equipment and for all staff who work with it.

Bezan was inspired to propose the bill after his wife, who he describes as a "sunworshipper", was diagnosed with melanoma twice. He says she used both natural sunlight and tanning beds.

"I'd like to see people avoid those circumstances that we've gone through as a family," he said.

He's hoping all three parties will support the bill.

The Canadian Cancer Society predicted that 5,000 Canadians would be diagnosed with melanoma skin cancer in 2009, and 940 would die.

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