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The heat is on

Health groups want tanning industry's hide for still allowing teens their place in the artificial sun

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More than three years after the Canadian Cancer Society called on the province to ban minors from tanning salons -- because of cancer risks -- no moves have been made to regulate the industry.

And it's been six months since the Canadian Cancer Society released a study showing that artificial tanning facilities in Toronto are not following Health Canada's voluntary safety guidelines, including those related to the protection of underaged youth and the identification of individuals at greater risk of developing skin cancer.

In fact, the Cancer Society told the Toronto Sun it has had just one exploratory information meeting with the province since its study was released in October 2008.

"If there's no legislation, it'll be business as usual for tanning facilities and youth will continue to be unprotected," said Stephanie Murray, the CCS's senior co-ordinator of public issues in Ontario.

"We know self-regulation and education is not enough and we need strong government legislation and for the government to be a leader on this issue," Murray said.

"We know we'll see Ontario youth being able to continue to access artificial tanning equipment and they will continue to be exposed to ultraviolet radiation, putting them at risk for skin cancer."

However, Steve Gilroy, executive director of the Joint Canadian Tanning Association, disputes the CCS's contention, saying its October study was misleading because no one who posed as a client actually took a tanning session.

Otherwise, Gilroy said, they would have been further questioned about their age and skin type.

"The covert actions taken to call for legislative controls on a responsible industry is regrettable," he said.

"We believe in parental consent and are working with the government to help create guidelines and make sure everyone in Ontario who turns on a bed is certified."

Health Canada's tanning safety guidelines say children under 16 years of age should not use tanning equipment, but those regulations are voluntary.

Actual regulation is left up to provincial governments and in Ontario, there are no regulations in place regarding the use of artificial tanning equipment by minors.

NDP health critic France Gelinas, who has put forward a private member's bill to regulate tanning salons, said the government has sat on the issue for far too long while the industry continues to target young customers.

"The part that irks me the most is the industry knows that it is something that is appealing to kids and they have found all sorts of marketing ways to get to the kids," Gelinas said. "If you go to a teen dance, I guarantee you one of the door prizes will be free tanning sessions."

"Kids are one of the biggest, growing markets for the tanning industry and we're basically exposing our kids to a slow death with cancer," she said.

Gelinas said her bill, which would deal with youth use of tanning services, is going "nowhere" in the process because the government hasn't shown any interest in it.

"Let's do it now because we can't wait; the industry is not waiting," she said.

The World Health Organization in 2005 recommended all nations ban the use of artificial tanning equipment by youth under 18 because of the impact it has on the development of skin cancer.

"More and more states and countries have banned youth under the age of 18 from using tanning equipment, we'd like to call on the provincial government to restrict the use of artificial tanning for youth under the age of 18 as soon as possible," Dr. Cheryl Rosen, national director of Sun Awareness program at the Canadian Dermatology Association, said.

Cancer and health-care advocates say teens are particularly vulnerable to industry pitches because of concerns over body image, and heightened by popular reality shows such as Sunset Tan, which glamorizes the lives of workers and their clients in a tanning salon in California.

"Ultraviolet radiation exposure in youth under 18 increases their risk of developing skin cancer later in life," the CCS's Murray said. "We're really concerned because artificial tanning equipment can emit ultraviolet radiation at levels five times stronger than midday summer sun."

"This ban is not a new idea -- other jurisdictions like Scotland, France and Australia have already implemented laws banning the use of artificial tanning equipment for youth under 18," Murray said.

"We're asking Ontario youth be afforded the same level of protection that youth around the world are getting."

The CCS would also like to maintain a provincial registry of artificial tanning equipment and a comprehensive certification of staff trained on operating the equipment and on how to identify fair skin clients.

Liberal MPP Khalil Ramal -- who also introduced a private member's bill last June to prevent Ontario youth under the age of 19 from using tanning equipment -- is still pushing for regulation of the whole tanning industry, including the certification of tanning salon operators, after his bill was taken off the table.

"I was shocked when I learned that this is not regulated ... this is more dangerous for the skin and can cause cancer," Ramal said. "It's dangerous to expose people with radiation."

"I would like to regulate the whole industry in a fair, healthy and acceptable way," he said. "It's important for people who operate tanning salons to know what they're doing for the safety of the clients ... the most important thing is to protect the people of Ontario."

Gary Wheeler, a ministry of health promotion spokesman, said the province is aware of the concerns about the impact of ultraviolet rays in tanning salons and its links to skin cancer.

"The ministry supports the importance of increased public awareness and the use of tanning salons and the risks of using such equipment," Wheeler said.

Last fall, the CCS released a study they conducted showing that artificial tanning facilities in Toronto are not following Health Canada's voluntary safety guidelines.

The report found 96% of personnel operating the 79 tanning facilities visited did not communicate Health Canada's tanning safety guidelines with study volunteers who posed as potential clients.

60% DID NOT ASK AGE

The report also found 60% of tanning facilities did not ask the age of minors who posed as clients.

Another 60% of tanning facilities visited did not identify, neither verbally or through a skin assessment survey, that the potential client had type I skin that burns and never tans. Only 12% of facilities visited were reported to have the Health Canada voluntary guidelines posted in an area that could be seen by the researchers.

"It's critical to have the regulation for minors because the Canadian Cancer Society study was conducted in Toronto and we have clear evidence (Canada's safety guidelines are) very lax," said Safoura Moazami, a Toronto Public Health promotion consultant.

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