Jan. 17, 2019

To the editor:

The American Academy of Dermatology is passionate about skin cancer prevention because it can save lives and reduce patient suffering. While we appreciate the inclusion of our perspective in the recent article “Is Sunscreen the New Margarine?”, we are concerned that this piece contains misleading information that could damage the public’s health.

The AAD’s sun protection recommendations are based on sound scientific research, as multiple studies have shown that unprotected exposure to ultraviolet light increases one’s skin cancer risk. (Statistics and citations are available on the AAD website.) Some of the claims in your article, however, do not have the same level of scientific evidence — and making decisions based on the data in a single paper or the unsupported claims of one doctor can be dangerous.

The Lindqvist study, for example, has several limitations. Most notably, it draws the conclusion that the results are attributable to sun exposure alone, without considering that other healthy lifestyle factors, including outdoor recreational activities, also may increase life expectancy. Further, the study did not record the sun protection habits of participants, so the results do not account for potential differences in protected versus unprotected UV exposure.

While we cannot comment on some of the other claims in the article, as citations were not provided, we would be interested in reading the research on which they’re based. We also look forward to reviewing Dr. Weller’s upcoming study when it is published to see if it provides a scientific foundation for his claims about the benefits of sun exposure.

The AAD is also concerned that this article minimizes the importance of skin cancer prevention. Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States, affecting one in every five Americans, and it can be devastating for patients. While melanoma does indeed account for the majority of skin cancer deaths, other types of skin cancer, including squamous cell carcinoma, can be fatal. Further, every case of skin cancer, including basal cell carcinoma, has the potential to cause severe tissue damage, bleeding and ulceration. As a result, skin cancer diagnoses can have a significant emotional toll on patients.

As the article notes, the AAD’s member dermatologists see the impact of skin cancer in our offices every day, and UV exposure is the most preventable skin cancer risk factor — so we have a good reason to promote sun protection. We don’t, however, want the public to fear the sun or spend all their time indoors. On the contrary, we want them to enjoy the outdoors while staying safe in the sun — and we are concerned your article may discourage them from doing so.

Suzanne M. Olbricht, MD, FAAD
President, American Academy of Dermatology