



# Reader Feedback

## More Reliable and Safer Prevention of Vitamin D Deficiency

After reading Dr. Felicetta's editorial "Put Down the Sunscreen—And Soak in the Vitamin D!," which appeared in the May 2010 issue (starting on page 10), I found it unfortunate that the only method of dealing with vitamin D deficiency advocated in the editorial was increasing patients' sun exposure.

Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma of the skin account for half of all cancers in the United States, with more than 100,000 diagnoses per year in the VHA. The standard treatment is lesion excision—at an annual cost of about \$2.5 billion to the U.S. health care system and \$100 million to the VHA.<sup>1</sup> In addition to nonmelanoma skin cancer (NMSC) adversely affecting quality of life in veteran patients,<sup>2</sup> nearly 75,000 deaths in the United States were attributed to NMSC from 1969 to 2000.<sup>3</sup> Excluding NMSC, malignant melanoma is the fourth most frequent malignancy at the Bay Pines VA Medical Center, Florida.

The incidence of invasive melanoma in the United States continues to rise (approximately 4% to 6% annually) despite efforts to improve primary prevention.<sup>4,5</sup> The current lifetime risk for developing invasive melanoma is 1 in 58,<sup>4</sup> and when in situ melanoma is added, the risk for developing melanoma jumps to 1 in 30.<sup>3</sup> It was estimated that 8,650 Americans died of melanoma in 2009.<sup>4</sup>

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In view of these statistics—and the CME article on skin cancer prevention in the May 2010 issue—I was surprised that *Federal Practitioner* chose to publish an editorial that may increase morbidity and mortality due to skin cancer in the veteran patient population. Sun exposure is not always a reliable way to improve vitamin D levels, especially for patients living in northern climes during the winter or for patients with darker skin. The majority of articles that discuss improving vitamin D levels instead recommend vitamin D supplements. Although vitamin D may not be helpful in the prevention of malignant melanoma,<sup>6</sup> there may well be health advantages to vitamin D supplements of 1,000 IU to 2,000 IU per day.<sup>8</sup> This is an area of ongoing research.<sup>9</sup>

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The author responds:

*I thank Dr. Hogan for his useful comments. The purpose of my editorial was not to dispute the use of sunscreen so much as it was to point out the huge potential benefits of a greater focus on vitamin D. Sun exposure is a very effective way to increase vitamin D production. As in all areas of medicine, there needs to be an appropriate balance between the risks and the benefits of different therapeutic strategies. Sun exposure is no exception. Excessive sun exposure can cause skin problems, whereas inadequate sun exposure can play a major role in leading to vitamin D deficiency, with many potential consequences in a wide variety of organ systems.*

—James V. Felicetta, MD  
Editor-in-Chief

## REFERENCES

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