

LOCAL

6-month wait to see a dermatologist

By Chuck Poulsen

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Although skin cancer rates continue to rise in Canada, there is a severe shortage of dermatologists.

In the Okanagan, just one dermatologist serves Kelowna and Vernon.

Dr. Carmel Anderson's waiting list is six months long. She has stopped putting names on her cancellation list because that has too many names on it to make a cancellation appointment even remotely possible except for those at the top.

The Canadian Dermatology Association said only between 600 and 700 dermatologists are available to treat the country's population of more than 30 million.

"Dermatology departments in universities haven't had enough funding to educate more residents," said Anderson. "That's the bottom line. We're seeing an increase in need because of skin cancer and a huge decrease in manpower of dermatologists. It's worrisome."

Anderson said her waiting list was so long that she has tried to get patients to see dermatologists in Vancouver.

"People booked into Vancouver are two to four months longer than me," said Anderson.

"Kelowna has a shorter waiting list than Vancouver."

She said some dermatologists have committed their practices to cosmetic surgery, which also adds to the shortage of dermatologists available to treat medical problems.

"I've chosen to not make a ton of money, to not do Botox or do fillers because I can't justify it in my conscience," said Anderson. "A lot of dermatologists are doing cosmetics and that's another reason there are such long waiting lists."

Anderson said she could make a week's income in a day if she did cosmetic surgery.

Dr. John Toole, president of the dermatology association, said while the problem is recognized, it is not being addressed in a significant way.

About 50 per cent of the association's members are 55 years old or older.

"We can expect that, in spite of the increasing demands (for dermatologists), that a lot of these doctors are going to be retiring or cutting back on their workload," said Toole. It's estimated that 73,000 new cases of skin cancer will be diagnosed across Canada this year, with 4,600 of those being melanoma – the most deadly skin cancer. It killed 910 people in Canada in 2007.

Anderson has several ideas on how to keep your skin well: protect it from the sun with sunscreen and stay out of the midday sun.

"I'm not saying we should hide," she said. "We should all get out and be active and enjoy life. But if you get out, have a hat, apply and reapply sunscreen."

She also suggested drinking green tea, eating lots of green vegetables and cutting down on the bad fats to achieve healthy skin.

Anderson also said that smoking presents two dangers to the skin: it creates wrinkles and skin cancer.

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