

Skin cancer diagnosis trial to upskill GPs, use AI in Loddon Mallee

ABC Mildura-Swan Hill / By Tyrone Dalton

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Andrew Crossman has undergone three surgeries to reconstruct his nose after skin cancer. *(Supplied: Sarah Crossman)*

Andrew Crossman first noticed a rough patch of skin on the tip of his nose in 2019.

The tennis coach and avocado farmer was naturally concerned, having spent a lifetime in the sun, but had always worn a hat.

To be safe, Mr Crossman saw his GP, had a biopsy taken and was given the all-clear.

But that rough patch returned twice in 2022 and was removed both times, before again returning one year later.

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said.

His consultant surgeon confirmed his suspicions, it was an aggressive skin cancer, a squamous cell carcinoma, that had returned.



Mr Crossman says he's spent more than 45 years on the tennis court and worked outdoors in avocado orchards. *(Supplied: Sarah Crossman)*

Mr Crossman's nose would require extensive plastic surgery to remove the tumour and to reconstruct his nose using skin from his forehead, cheek, chest and cartilage from his ears.

"If you can imagine having your index finger stuck to your left eyebrow and then to your nostril, that's what it looked like," he said.

The 54-year-old is one of an expected 13,000 people in the Loddon Mallee region of north-west Victorian that researchers estimate is living with skin cancer, according to Loddon Mallee Integrated Cancer Services data.

The service reveals the region's skin cancer rate is 34 per cent above the Victorian average.

As a result, it's been earmarked for the trial of a new program using artificial intelligence (AI) to identify and treat skin cancers more quickly.

"My GP always said to me being a lifelong tennis coach and avocado orchardist, even though I've done the right thing from my late teens wearing a big hat, it goes against me," Mr Crossman said.

"Time in the sun and accumulative hours. He said, 'Look, there's every chance you're going to get something along the line'."

Using AI to detect skin cancer

Despite the extensive plastic surgery to his nose, Mr Crossman considers himself one of the lucky ones.

Behind the diagnosis of skin cancers in regional Australia are the barriers to being treated in a timely and effective way, according to research from La Trobe University.

The university's researchers are setting out to develop a "world-class" treatment plan after northern Victorians reported barriers to getting proper treatment for skin cancers, such as basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma.

Professor Leigh Kinsman, from La Trobe's Violet Vines Marshman Centre for Rural Health Research, will lead the five-year project, which is backed by \$2.8 million of federal government funding.



Professor Leigh Kinsman says the program will test the use of AI to diagnose skin cancer. *(ABC Mildura-Swan Hill: Tyrone Dalton)*

He said the project aimed to narrow the gap between metropolitan and regional health outcomes and will include training GPs to remove skin cancers and using AI.

"At the moment, it's just an app on a phone that can be used to take a photograph of a lesion and assist with the diagnosis," he said.

"We don't know how accurate that is yet, so we want to make sure that if we're going to introduce artificial intelligence, it's done in the best possible way and safe."

Upskilling to speed up treatment

Loddon Mallee residents told the university's researchers that distance, lower health literacy, difficulty accessing GPs, treatment delays and a lack of communication between health services as problems when being treated for skin cancer.

Tom Dewar is a Central Victorian GP who specialises in skin cancers.

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Dr Tom Dewar wants to see GPs upskilled to perform biopsies as part of skin cancer checks. *(ABC Mildura-Swan Hill: Tyrone Dalton)*

He said a shortage of general practitioners, dermatologists and plastic surgeons in regional Victoria was leading to delayed diagnosis and management of skin cancers.

"We hope to streamline and standardise the care of skin cancers in our region," he said.

"Upskilling, such as biopsy, which is taking a sample of tissue for analysis under a microscope from sites that they might not be comfortable with, including head and neck lesions.

"Many skin cancers that are referred to hospital could be managed through the referring doctor, but that doesn't exist."

Sun 'overexposure' and outdoor living

Bureau of Meteorology data shows Loddon Mallee has a high daily exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays.

Dr Dewar said just 6 per cent of dermatologists in Australia practice in regional areas.

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Cheryl Martin says the study will look to understand the unique attributes of the Loddon Mallee that make it prone to higher rates of skin cancer. *(ABC Mildura-Swan Hill: Tyrone Dalton)*

She said the Loddon Mallee region was home to people who worked outdoors in high temperatures, poor public transport over a large area, and low socio-economic areas.

"There's exposure issues and risk factors, and access to early diagnosis and treatment even if people understand how skin cancers are formed, and the different aspects of the sun with UV light and the risk factors associated with that," she said.

The Violet Vines Marshman Centre for Rural Health Research said regional Victorians are found to be 47 per cent more likely to be newly diagnosed with melanoma than those in major cities.

Mr Crossman always wore a wide-brimmed hat while playing and coaching tennis. *(Supplied: Sarah Crossman)*

And despite being one of the 13,000 in the Loddon Mallee to experience skin cancer, Mr Crossman stands by his decision to cover up from an early age.

"It's all about prevention, isn't it? Getting it out there that this can kill you, making people cover up, wear a hat, long sleeve shirts and do the right thing."

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