

# The Slip Slop Slap years: Have they had a lasting impact on today's adolescents?

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## Introduction

Skin cancer remains one of the most common forms of cancer in Australia,<sup>1</sup> although prevention programs appear to be having an impact on incidence and mortality.<sup>2</sup> Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation during the childhood and teenage years have been identified as critical risk factors in the development of skin cancers.<sup>3,4</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, national prevention campaigns including mass media, community-based activities and sports sponsorship resulted in very high levels of awareness of skin cancer prevention.<sup>5</sup> For example, the 'Slip Slop Slap' message aimed at young children and their families was given wide exposure across the mass media throughout the 1980s and 1990s and became synonymous with sun protection in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

National monitoring of sun protective practices in Australia has shown that while most age groups have made positive changes,

this is much less so for 12-18 year olds.<sup>6-8</sup> While levels of knowledge about the relationship between UV exposure and skin cancer remain high,<sup>9,10</sup> studies of high school students show a rapid decrease in the use of sun protection around the ages of 12-14, a decrease which persists to the age of 18 years.<sup>11,12</sup>

Given that in New South Wales (NSW) there has not been a media campaign targeting this age group since 1996, it is timely to explore adolescents' perceptions regarding sun protection media messages in order to develop campaigns that might be effective in changing their sun protection practices. This study aimed to explore the following issues among high school students: unprompted recall of sun protection mass media; perceptions of the relevance and impact of those media; and perceptions regarding the most appropriate advertisements to have an impact on adolescent sun protection.

## Abstract

**Issue addressed:** During the 1980s and 1990s adolescents' level of sun protection remained low while other age groups made positive changes to their sun protection practices. A qualitative exploration of the perceptions of 12-17 year olds regarding sun protection media messages was conducted to provide background data for the development of future campaigns.

**Methods:** Seventeen focus group discussions were held with high school students in three public high schools in New South Wales. The focus groups were segregated by age and gender.

**Results:** Messages such as 'Slip Slop Slap' were highly salient with most groups. Participants perceived these messages to be highly relevant during their childhood, while having limited impact during adolescence. There was evidence of both positive and negative associations with these campaigns. Participants expressed preferences for either humour-based or very graphic campaigns.

**Conclusions:** The strong mnemonic value and remembered appeal of previous campaigns provides a foundation that future campaigns might build on, while taking into consideration adolescents' desire to distance themselves from the childlike associations of such messages.

**Key words:** Skin cancer, sun protection, adolescents, mass media, focus groups.

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## So what?

Although adolescents have not been as receptive to sun protection messages as other age groups, well-designed, age-appropriate mass media campaigns that build on previous messages may have an impact on their behaviour.

## Method

A market research company was contracted to facilitate 17 focus group discussions regarding sun protection with 95 students from three public high schools in the Hunter Region, NSW. The schools were selected in an effort to achieve representation from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The group discussions lasted 45-60 minutes and were held with three year groups: Years 7-8; Years 9-10 and Years 11-12. The groups contained a minimum of four and a maximum of nine students per group. The groups were conducted in class time during November and early December in 2001 (for Years 7-10) and during January 2002 at the market research company's focus group facilities for students in Years 11-12. Students were recruited by mailing an information letter to school principals to seek permission to conduct focus groups in the school. Teachers distributed information and consent letters at school. Active written consent was required from both student and parent prior to participation. The consent form indicated that the discussions would include questions about skin cancer. The focus groups were segregated by gender to facilitate group discussions. At an appropriate point in the discussions participants were prompted regarding advertising recall, eg: "How about media and advertising?" or "What sorts of advertising do people remember?" Participants were not given any further prompts to aid recall of specific campaigns or advertisements.

## Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed by the focus group facilitator (NP), then audited by one of the authors (FT). Auditing involved comparing transcripts to extracted themes for accuracy. One author (CP) independently coded the data for thematic content. Both sets of coding were in agreement on the primary themes, with some additional depth of detail extracted by CP. Therefore, the more detailed coding was used.

## Results

### Recall of campaigns

In almost all groups (14/17) the 'Slip Slop Slap' message ("Slip on a shirt, Slop on sunscreen and Slap on a hat") was mentioned immediately by at least one group member and most other group members indicated that they also recalled this campaign. Participants in most groups (11/17) nominated the 'snowman' advertisements (showing Seymour the Snowman who melts in the sun and featuring the Slip, Slop, Slap message). Participants in approximately half the groups (8/17) made mention of the 'Me No Fry' campaign (for older children and including animated eggs frying without sun protection) with no apparent age or gender variation.

### Perceived relevance and impact of recalled media

Participants perceived the media messages were instructional and overly directive. These messages were perceived as providing information and demonstrating the consequences of unprotected UV exposure. The campaigns were also perceived as being a reminder or prompt to use sun protection, with the soundtracks in particular being perceived as memorable.

*"I don't know. It's easy to remember."*

*"It gets stuck in your head."*

*"The song gets in your head. It's really corny." (Year 10 males)*

The relevance and appropriateness of the campaigns were perceived as being high for pre-teen age groups but very low for those in the teenage years. From a teenage perspective the campaigns were perceived as being 'simplistic', 'boring' and lacking realism or believability. Participants noted that the original impact of these campaigns was being lost over time due to their own changing lifestyles and a lack of messages appropriate for their own age group. The participants mentioned the need for campaigns that reinforced the messages they had received when they were younger, yet adapted these messages to the newer realities of teenage life.

*"... me no fry with the egg. I used to love that ad".*  
(Year 11 male)

Sun protection advertisements were perceived as appearing less frequently than other health-related advertisements such as those from the National Tobacco Campaign, and therefore having much less salience:

*"The main reason people are aware of smoking is because of the ads on TV. Most people watch TV so they're aware of the ads." "Nobody cares because nobody knows about it (sun protection)." (Year 8 female)*

The campaigns were also perceived as having had some motivational impact, in the context of most teenagers' desire to avoid sunburn, discomfort, looking burned, and skin cancer. The campaigns were also credited with associating positive feelings with the use of sun protection.

*"They make me feel when I'm actually putting the stuff on that I'm doing the right thing." (Year 8 male)*

However, the motivational impact for this age group was perceived to be limited by the cartoon basis of these campaigns, a lack of overt reasons for sun protection practices and the lack of the 'cool' factor. The participants perceived the messages as no longer having an impact on their behaviour, being less adequate as a prompt for them as teenagers and being unsuccessful with their age group.

### Preferences for future sun protection media

Some participants noted an appreciation of and desire for fun and humour in campaigns, while others expressed a perceived

need for graphic images and strong messages in order to have an impact on their behaviour. A strong preference was expressed (by males more often than females) for the use of graphic and realistic images with 'shock' value. Advertisements used in recent years by the National Tobacco Campaign and the Roads and Traffic Authority were given as examples of the preferred style. A preference for 'real' cases showing the true consequences of skin cancer was expressed, such as those seen on real-life medical television programs. The use of age appropriate or sporting role models was also suggested.

*"With the snowman they're just like little cartoons and I don't really pay much attention to them. I just look at them and laugh but if you see like real people who have had all the bad stuff on their faces, really bad, you take more notice of that than the little cartoons." (Year 8 male)*

## Discussion and Conclusion

The data suggests that campaigns using the 'Slip Slop Slap' slogan continue to have a high level of recall among adolescents. The 'Me No Fry' campaign was also recalled by participants in half the groups, which could be considered surprising given that the campaign took place during 1990-1996. There is evidence that adolescents make both positive and negative associations with these childhood-focused campaigns. The strong mnemonic value and remembered appeal regarding the cartoon aspects of these campaigns have laid a foundation that could potentially be creatively utilised in campaigns relevant to adolescents. However, there is a need to take into consideration adolescents' desire to distance themselves from the childhood associations of such messages. Some felt sun protection had been given a 'lightweight' and non-urgent status by the child-focused campaigns which, therefore, lowered its perceived importance for adolescents. This suggests both a need and a desire for age-

appropriate advertising, or greater use of existing advertisements, for example the 'Time Bomb' advertisement that has aired primarily in States other than NSW.

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