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## Foundation takes aim at reducing incidence of melanoma

By Jon Kingdon

As the summer swimming season recently wound down, with 3,000 swimmers competing in the Lafayette and Orinda-Moraga Pool Association meets, a silent killer was stalking the participants: the sun and all of its UV radiation, exacerbated by the rays' reflection off of water, sand, concrete and tiled deck surfaces.

As the swimmers and spectators entered the Campolindo Aquatic Center for the OMPA Meet, they were first met with a poster warning of the dangers of melanoma and a complimentary offer of sunscreen provided by AIM at Melanoma and TropicSport. Manning the table was Lafayette resident Alicia Rowell who was educating people about the risks of excessive exposure to the sun. Explains Rowell: "At the OMPA, I wanted to increase the awareness of the risk factors for melanoma. It was very gratifying to get so many thanks for bringing this issue to their attention and for providing the sun screen that so many had neglected to put on." Since 2016, Rowell has been the vice president of the AIM at Melanoma Foundation, a large global, nonprofit organization, working in the areas of fundraising and project management: "I used to work at the University of California and I got an executive search call to be the V.P. of AIM at Melanoma. In 2013, my husband Buddy was diagnosed with stage 3 melanoma and it was just a coincidence that I was called by AIM." Says Rowell: "I'm a part of the generation that put on baby oil and sat in the sun. We used to say, 'I burn and then I tan' but now we know that repetitive and severe sunburns in childhood are a major risk factor for melanoma. So, I have my skin checked by a dermatologist annually."

The Rowell's three children have spent their fair share of time in the sun, so she has their skin checked annually, too. Her two daughters, Lexi and Claire, play water polo year-round and for Acalanes High School. Her son Robby played football for Acalanes, among other sports, and is now playing at Cal. "I stress sunscreen, hats, and shade with them," says Rowell. "They are at higher risk because of their dad, in addition to their light skin and blue eyes."

AIM was founded in 2004 and is the largest international melanoma foundation seeking the cure for melanoma. The foundation focuses its efforts in three areas: innovation in melanoma research, legislative reform and patient and caregiver support. "Melanoma research has lagged behind other cancers, says Rowell, and AIM intends to change that. AIM designs and manages global collaborative research projects. We think the cure will be found by bringing the best researchers from all over the world together."

In 2006, AIM put together the International Melanoma Working Group comprised of researchers from the United States, Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. AIM now organizes semiannual meetings, pulling together researchers and the pharmaceutical industry to share their research to accelerate the quest for more effective therapies and ultimately a cure for melanoma.

Epitomizing the international nature of the research, this past year there were meetings in Athens, Greece and Florence, Italy. In March of this year, they met in Edinburgh, Scotland and will be meeting again in November in Barcelona, Spain.

As research on primary tissue has resulted in major advances in breast and prostate cancer, similar research is needed on melanoma tissue. According to Rowell, a critically important tool in melanoma research will be AIM at Melanoma's International Melanoma Tissue Bank Consortium: "There are now four medical research institutions across the United States and one in Australia about to open where researchers can study the primary tumors along with depersonalized patient data. The genetic code lies in the primary tumor. These fresh frozen tissue banks will stimulate new treatments."

The fundraising by Rowell and others is crucial to the research that will be conducted at the tissue banks. It costs approximately \$6,400 to collect and properly process a single tissue sample for research because the fully annotated sample requires blood and urine samples, epidemiology, digital photography, patient history, freezing, storage, shipping and legal documentation. The initial goal is to collect 500 tissue samples at a cost of \$3.2 million. The expense is worth it, according to Rowell: "We are excited to see the discoveries that will emerge from the research."

Melanoma accounts for less than 5 percent of all skin cancers, but it leads to the large majority of skin cancer deaths. Ninety-five percent of skin cancers are basal cell and squamous cell cancers, which are not as a rule deadly, but can still be dangerous.

The World Health Organization estimates that as many as 60,000 people a year worldwide die from too much sun, mostly from malignant skin cancer. Of these deaths, 48,000 are from melanoma and 12,000 are from other cancers. About 90 percent of these cancers are caused by ultraviolet rays from the sun.

Rowell sums it all up very simply: "The sun is warm and beautiful and makes things grow, but your skin is not a piece of bacon - do not get fried!"

For more information, visit [AIMatmelanoma.org](http://AIMatmelanoma.org).

Reach the reporter at: [sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com)

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