Driving on the sunny side: Are skin cancers more prevalent on the driver’s side?

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Whether we live in the city or the country, most Australians spend a significant portion of their time behind the wheel of a car. But could our driving habits be unwittingly increasing our risk of skin cancer through increased exposure to ultra-violet (UV) rays?

Two Perth-based doctors, Dr Hardeep Jhattu and Mr Jeremy Rawlins, today posed this question to the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons’ Annual Scientific Congress in Brisbane.

The doctors believe that given the heavy reliance on car use in Australia, more research is needed as to whether drivers are placed at increased risk of sun damage through exposure to UV rays.

“Exposure to UV rays is one of the strongest risk factors associated with skin cancer. This is a well-publicised fact and thanks to various public health campaigns over the years, I think most Australians are aware of this,” Dr Jhattu said.

“However, what a lot people might not be aware of are the two different types of UV Rays; UVA and UVB. While UVB rays are unable to penetrate glass, UVA rays easily penetrate surfaces, such as sunroofs and windows.”

Dr Jhattu, and senior surgeon Mr Rawlins, are currently conducting a retrospective analysis of the particular areas of the body in post-operative patients with skin cancer at Fiona Stanley Hospital.

They hope their research can be used to inspire further investigation into the issue and will provide additional guidance to road users.

“Recent studies in the US have shown that the incidence of skin cancer is more common on the left-hand side of the body (the driver’s side of the car), but to date there are no comprehensive studies in Australia,” Dr Jhattu said.

“The aim of the study isn’t to suggest that people should stop driving cars as we recognise that this is a necessity for most people.”

“However, if the results do point towards a greater prevalence of skin cancer on the driver’s side of the body, hopefully we can raise awareness of this, and help guide prevention strategies to minimise the risk of skin cancer in the future.”

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