

THE LEADERSHIP

REVIEW

PLAYING THE

Long Game

PREVENTION IS STILL *the best cure*

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR HELENA ROSENGREN

Australian summer always hits with full force, suddenly overnight you awake to a thick humid air and hot breezes that are always met with open arms. The Jacarandas bloom and many of us take the inaugural first 'swim' of the season.

Skin cancer causes more deaths than transport accidents every year in Australia. As the Sunshine State, Queensland is the skin cancer capital of the world. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that at least 2 in 3 Australians are diagnosed with skin cancer before the age of 70. These figures are even higher in Queensland.

As summer approaches, we talk to Dr Helena Rosengren, Board Member of the Skin Cancer College Australasia, Chair of the Research Committee Skin Cancer College Australasia and Medical Director of Skin Repair Skin Cancer Clinic in Townsville, North Queensland.



Dr Rosengren stresses the importance of sun safety and the devastating impacts of skin cancer- a lesson we must learn each summer season.

"Two out of three Australians develop skin cancer, and melanomas can be difficult to pick up as they can be any size, colour (including skin coloured), raised or flat, rough or smooth and can occur on areas of the body that have never or rarely seen direct sun," says Dr Rosengren.

Dr Rosengren talks of the emerging trends and sun habits she sees each year discussing the direct positive effects of Australia's relentless sun safety campaigns.

"The number of melanomas seen in young people is far higher in Australia and New Zealand than in any other country in the world.

"Reassuringly, however, over time there has been a definite slow reduction in the number of melanomas diagnosed in people under 40. This is thought to be as a result of slip, slop, slap and skin

cancer campaigns increasing skin cancer awareness and improving sun protective habits,"

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What many travellers don't understand until they experience a true red-raw Australian sunburn, is how strong our sun can be. As a matter of science and evolution, Dr Rosengren explains Australian skin cancer trends.

"Some of the inequity and skin cancer rates (especially on Tasmania and southern Australia) is due to depletion of the ozone layer as a result of pollution," she says.

"However, the main cause especially in northern Australia is due to the proximity of the equator. Melanoma rates, though not non-existent, are far lower in darker-skinned indigenous people.

"Basically, nature never intended fair skinned people to live so close to the equator. Another cause for the higher rates of skin cancer in Australia is the earth's uneven elliptical orbit around the sun.

"During the southern summer the planet is about 1.7% closer to the sun and in the northern summer is 1.7% further away from the sun. So, Australia is 3.4% closer to the sun throughout the summer than the northern hemisphere is

during their summer months. This effect increases UV by about 7%."

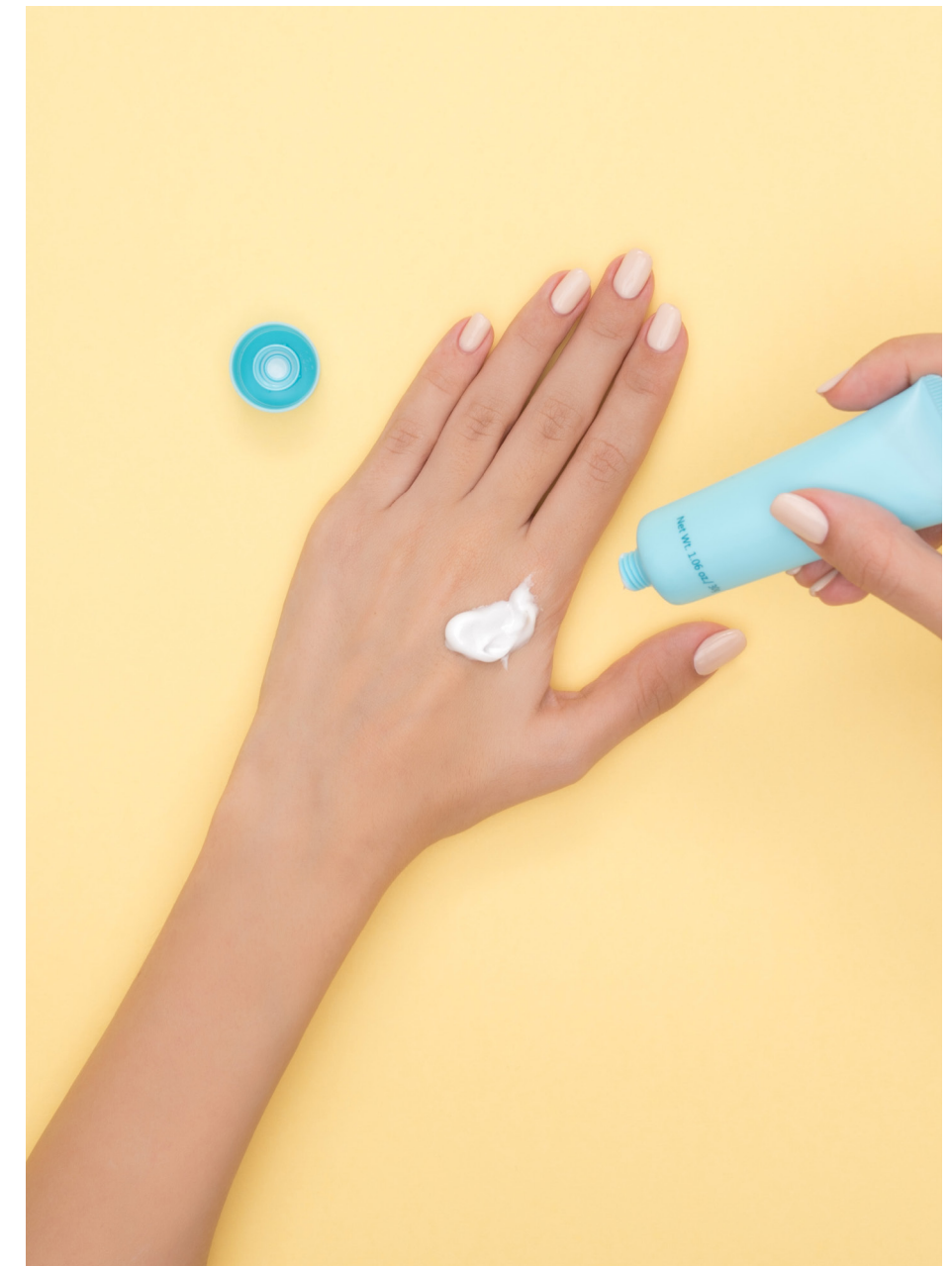
Dr Rosengren, believes that the most important skin check is often the first one you get, as it is most likely to pick up an undiagnosed potentially life-threatening skin cancer or melanoma.

"The optimal frequency of skin checks going forward will depend on the number of skin cancers you've already had, your age, occupation, number of moles, family history

of melanoma, recreational activities and sun protective behaviours," she says.

"For example, a 60 year old outdoor worker who has already had 10 skin cancer would benefit from six monthly skin checks whereas a 25-year-old woman who works indoors, has never had a skin cancer and practices sun safe behaviours may only need a skin check every 2-5 years.

Likewise, she says that a sore that fails to heal after 3-4 weeks should be checked out



by a doctor with skin cancer training.

“A spot that bleeds with towelling off or that is changing in size, shape or colour over a period of weeks is also suspicious for skin cancer. Any skin spots that stands out as looking very different from the other moles and blemishes on your skin could also prove to be a melanoma or skin cancer.”

Dr Rosengren explains the realities of being diagnosed with skin cancer, from treatment, surgeries, possible complications and the

long-term ramifications of a diagnosis.

“For many, a diagnosis of a skin cancer will just mean a simple excision, a freezing treatment or using a cream daily for several weeks,” she says.

“For more advanced skin cancer more complex surgery such as a flap or graft surgery may be required. The more complex the surgery the greater the chance of complications such as infection, bleeding and scarring.

“At times a very advanced skin cancer will require a multidisciplinary in-hospital approach which could mean surgical removal of lymph

glands, weeks of radiotherapy treatment or many months of injected immunotherapy. There is no doubt that the earlier we catch a skin cancer, the simpler the treatment, the faster the recovery and the better the cosmetic results.”

Just like breast cancer the killer in skin cancer is metastasis.

Skin cancers will continue to grow larger in size and in the case of melanoma and squamous cell cancer can eventually invade small lymph vessels and travel to nearby lymph nodes. If the tumour invades a blood vessel it can spread to distant organs such as the liver or brain.

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“The most notable advance in recent years is immunotherapy. Where until five or six years ago there was no treatment

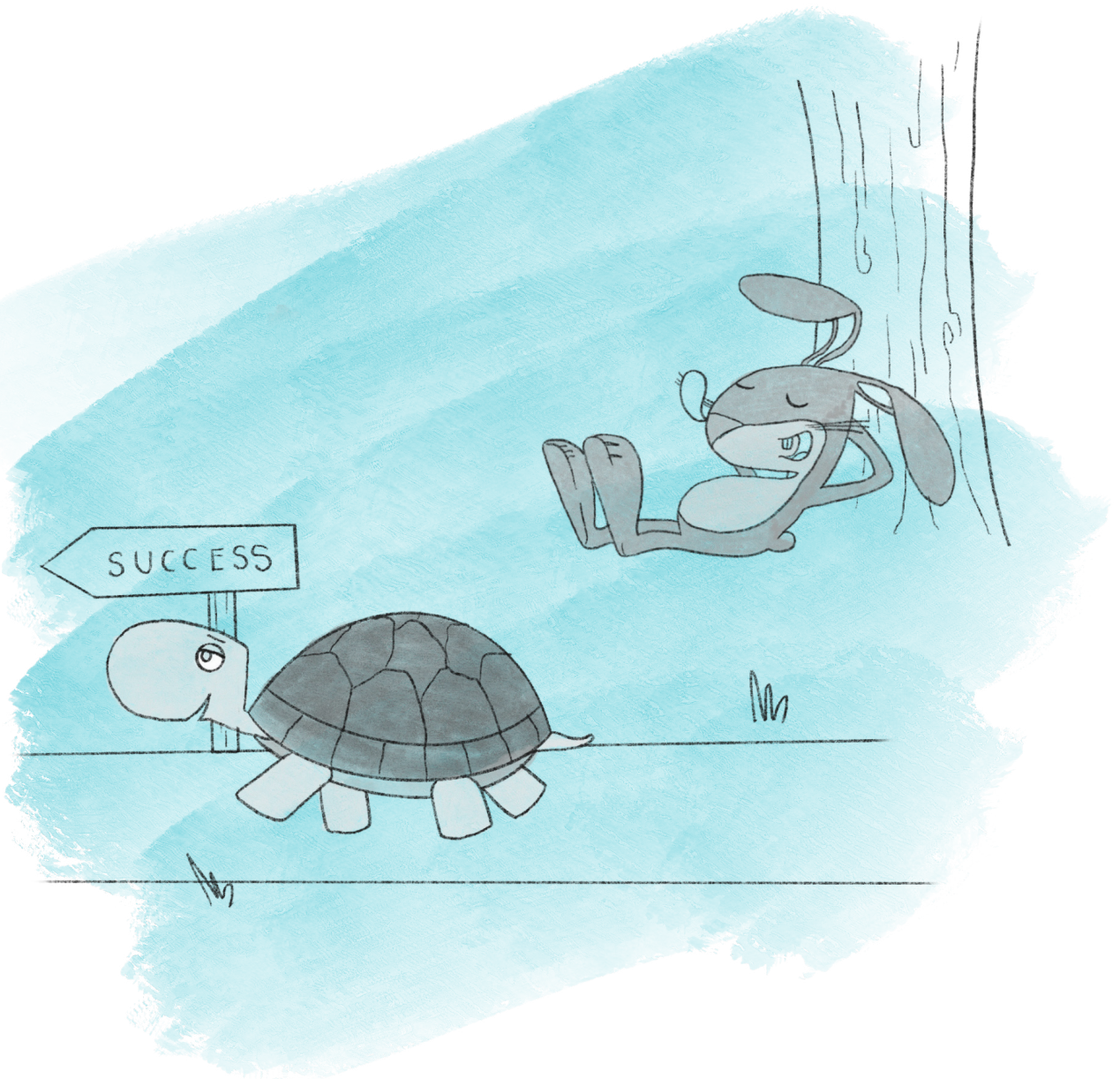
available to prolong life in the case of an advanced melanoma,” says Dr Rosengren.

“However, with the advent of immunotherapy we are now seeing many people able to return to work and a near normal lifestyle despite having metastasis from an aggressive skin cancer. It’s actually miraculous compared to the previous status quo.”

So, as summer fast approaches, the saying ‘prevention is the best cure’ remains poignant. As each year is predicted to get hotter and more humid, self-leadership for the benefit of your skin is the ultimate form of self-care.

Dr Helena Rosengren is a Board Member of the Skin Cancer College Australasia, Chair of the Research Committee Skin Cancer College Australasia and Medical Director of Skin Repair Skin Cancer Clinic in Townsville, North Queensland.





SLOW AND STEADY

