Lack of data hampers research, resource allocation, dermatologist says

Ottawa

The rates of non-melanoma skin cancers are rising by as much as 6% in Ontario, but the full scope of the problem cannot be measured properly until the province establishes a tumour registry to track non-melanoma skin cancers, researchers said here.

“We have to recognize that as dermatologists, we are at the forefront of treating this disorder, and until we establish a formal tumour registry for tracking non-melanoma skin cancer in this province, we will have no hope of evaluating the efficacy of our treatment or allocating resources in a better way to treat this disease,” said Dr. Adam Mamelak, an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Ottawa and the medical director of Sanova Dermatology in Austin, Texas.

Dr. Mamelak spoke at the Canadian Dermatology Association’s annual conference here.

In order to estimate the prevalence of non-melanoma skin cancers, Dr. Mamelak and colleagues reviewed all Ontario billing claims associated with non-melanoma skin cancer diagnoses between 2003 and 2009. They found the number of claims rose to 378,482, an increase of 36%, from 277,730 during that time.

A look at procedures involved in treating non-melanoma skin cancers showed biopsy claims increased by 22%, electrodesiccation and curettage by 23% and excisions by 25%. The biggest increases were in radiation therapy, up 55%. The biggest increases in new procedures in the past 5 years, 16

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Dr. Mamelak and colleagues examined billing claims involving new consultations and specific assessments by dermatologists. They saw a 27% increase in the new tumours dermatologists were seeing, which translates into an increase in incidence of 4.5% a year.

The reimbursement paid for these non-melanoma skin cancer claims totalled $22.6 million by 2009, up 73% from $13.1 million in 2003.

It was mainly dermatologists treating these patients, with these physicians responsible for 47% of the claims. Plastic surgeons were involved in 21% of the claims and family physicians in 19%.

Nationally, Statistics Canada estimated 81,300 new cases of non-melanoma skin cancer were detected in 2011, resulting in 350 deaths. This is up 11% from 2008’s estimate of 73,000, resulting in 260 deaths.

These national estimates are based on data from the BC Cancer Agency, CancerCare Manitoba and New Brunswick’s Department of Health, the only provincial agencies that track non-melanoma skin cancers.

The estimates come with a caveat that non-melanoma skin cancers are difficult to register because they are often treated in a doctor’s office and do not require hospitalization.

In response to an inquiry from the Medical Post, a representative from Cancer Care Ontario said in an e-mail that the agency has no plans to track basal and squamous cell carcinomas as part of the Ontario Cancer Registry.

However, the registry does capture some non-melanoma skin cancers such as sebaceous, eccrine and malignant sweat gland tumours.

[Continued on • page 62]