Health board vote keeps minors from tanning beds

By Sarah Breitenbach
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The Howard County Board of Health unanimously voted to ban minors from using indoor tanning beds this week, the first such ban in the nation, according to local health officials.

The new regulation, introduced in September by County Executive Kenneth Ulman and Dr. Peter Beilenson, the county health officer, prohibits children younger than 18 from using the devices, which some studies suggest cause melanoma, a deadly form of skin cancer.

The measure will take effect Thursday, Nov. 12.

The board’s decision followed a two-hour public hearing attended by about 60 people. During the hearing, proponents of the regulation argued that Maryland law, which requires parental permission for minors to tan, is not strong enough, while opponents argued that tanning has health benefits for some people and that the board was overstepping its authority.

Ban proponent Jane Shapiro, an Ellicott City resident and melanoma survivor, said she lost her father and grandmother to the cancer.

She said she visited tanning salons in her late 20s for less than a year.

“I had a hard enough time dealing with melanoma in middle age. I cannot imagine what it would be like dealing with melanoma as a teenager or young adult,” she said.

The ban also had the support of Brittany Lietz, Miss Maryland 2006, who attributes her melanoma to two years of regular use of indoor tanning beds.

“If you need to tan to feel good, you should probably ask yourself how scars all over your body would look, because that’s the boat I am in now,” Lietz, 24, said earlier this fall.

Representatives from anti-cancer organizations, including the American Cancer Society and Uhlman Cancer Fund for Young Adults (the county executive’s brother, Doug, whose cancer prompted establishment of the fund, is a skin cancer survivor), supported the measure.

Several cited a World Health Organization study that classifies tanning beds as a known carcinogen.

But opponents discounted the study because it included people with Type One skin, which burns easily and does not tan.

Joe Levy, vice president for International Smart Tan, said indoor tanning allows teens to build up a base tan in a controlled environment before outdoor sun exposure.

When asked by health board members if his organization keeps statistics on incidents of indoor tanning burns, he said he did not have a specific number, but it would be a small percentage.

“If we burned people, they would not come back,” he said. “It isn’t in our best interest to burn people.”

Bruce Bereano, a lobbyist representing the Indoor Tanning Association, said in order to create such a regulation under Maryland code, the board needed to prove tanning for minors is a nuisance or causes a disease.

“This record is woefully inaccurate and deficient to support that minors using a tanning salon is a public nuisance or causes disease,” he said.

Bereano promised to challenge the decision. “We’ll see them in court,” he said after the vote.

Salon owners and other advocates of indoor tanning also testified, arguing that banning minors from tanning salons would hurt business and that UV light exposure helps the body produce healthful Vitamin D.

Officials said there are 17 tanning salons in Howard County and more than 100 locations that offer tanning beds.

The measure also includes regulations governing sanitation and hygiene practices, and requires tanning salons to register with the health officer each year.

Although there is no fine for failing to comply with age restrictions, salon owners can be brought to court for allowing minors to tan, Beilenson said.

The Baltimore County Council took public comment this week on legislation that would create a similar ban. The seven-member council is scheduled to vote on the measure next week.

My young patients wish they had stayed away from tanning beds

I applaud the efforts of County Executive Kenneth Ulman and Dr. Peter Beilenson, the county health officer, for their success in passing the life-saving measure of prohibiting teens from tanning salons. As a dermatologist in private practice, I see young patients in their 20s and 30s who develop skin cancers. Many of these young patients report use of tanning beds as teenagers.

Some used the tanning beds to get “color” before a prom or to look healthy. They all regret their tanning-bed use.

Medical research shows that exposure to UV radiation is associated with an increased risk for skin cancers. The color that comes from exposing the skin to UV radiation is simply a sign of skin injury. The tan from a tanning bed and the tan from natural sunlight are equally damaging to the skin. There is no such thing as a “safe” tan.

In addition to skin cancers, I spend hours each day trying to erase the signs of premature aging caused by over-exposure to UV radiation. Interestingly, most teenagers are more worried about future wrinkles than skin cancer.

Only half the states regulate indoor-tanning use by teens. With this measure, Howard County is leading the country in skin-cancer prevention.

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