

Career counsellors and occupational contact dermatitis

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Career counsellors are in a unique position to provide timely preventive advice to young people at risk of developing occupational contact dermatitis. Career counsellors need to be aware of risk factors for this condition, including atopic eczema, and of high-risk occupations, such as hairdressing. A cross-sectional survey of 82 career counsellors was conducted at an Australian career counsellors' conference. 24 (29%, 95% confidence interval (95% CI) 19–40%) correctly identified eczema as a risk factor. 25 (30%, 95% CI 21–41%) indicated consideration of past skin problems during career counselling. 30 (36%, 95% CI 25–47%) correctly reported at least 1 high-risk occupation, with hairdressing being most frequently identified. Only 3 of the 82 (4%, 95% CI 0–7%) correctly answered all 3 questions.

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Childhood atopic eczema is a significant risk factor for developing occupational contact dermatitis (1–4). Certain industries, such as hairdressing, food, construction, healthcare and printing, are associated with a higher incidence of the disease (5). The effects of a history of atopic dermatitis and of high-risk occupations are multiplicative, such that if both these factors are present, the risk of developing occupational contact dermatitis is increased at least 4 times (6).

We present a survey of the awareness of risk factors for occupational contact dermatitis amongst a sample of Australian career counsellors.

Subjects and Methods

A cross-sectional survey was carried out on a sample of career counsellors at an Australian career counsellors' conference, the 11th Australian Association of Career Counsellors Conference, Melbourne, Australia. Delegates to the conference had at least one tertiary qualification, predominantly in education or psychology, with variable time spent as professional career counsellors. Individual demographic information was not collected. Career counsellors who attended the exhibition area were randomly approached to participate. Of 315 registered delegates, 82

(26%) completed the survey. Anonymous data was collected by 2 interviewers utilising a consistent data collection form (Table 1). Open-ended responses were recorded and independently coded by 2 investigators.

Results

Of the 82 career counsellors questioned, 25 (30%, 95% confidence interval (95% CI) 21–41%) indicated that they considered past skin problems when advising young people about future career choice. They were also questioned regarding their knowledge of risk factors for occupational contact dermatitis (Table 2). In all, 24 (29%, 95% CI 19–40%) of the career counsellors correctly identified a history of atopic eczema as a risk factor. When asked about employment fields with an increased risk of skin problems, 30 (36%, 95% CI 25–47%) correctly reported at least 1 high-risk occupation, with hairdressing being most frequently identified (Table 3). Only 3 of the 82 (4%, 95% CI 0–7%) career counsellors correctly answered all 3 questions.

Discussion

Pre-vocational advice to people with a history of atopic eczema has previously been recommended (5, 7–9). Several authors have published guides

Table 1. Career counsellor questionnaire

1. <i>Relevance of past atopic eczema</i> When you advise people about their career choices, do you consider if someone has had problems with their skin in the past?
2. <i>Risk factor identification</i> Do you know of any health conditions that make someone more prone to work-related skin disease?
3. <i>High-risk occupation identification</i> Do you know of any occupations with an increased risk of skin problems?

Table 2. Risk factor identification

Risk factor	Number (n = 82)*
Eczema	24
Asthma	15
Hay fever	2
Other responses	31
No knowledge of risk factors	28

* Each respondent was asked to identify up to 3 risk factors.

Table 3. High-risk occupation identification

Occupation	Number (n = 82)*
Hairdressing	31
Food handling	17
Cleaning	16
Hospital work	10
Miscellaneous	7
wet work	
Mechanics	4

* Each respondent was asked to identify up to 4 occupations.

for occupational counseling (6, 7, 10). This study demonstrates poor recognition of personal and occupational risk factors for developing skin problems at work among a sample of Australian career counsellors. Providing individuals with knowledge regarding their personal risk of developing occupational contact dermatitis provides an opportunity for informed career choices and the implementation of preventive strategies.

The authors have worked with an expert in health promotion to develop a programme to be directed at both career counsellors and young people with atopy. It would appear that providing specialist input into the many local web-based careers information sites will most effectively tar-

get these groups and that this is achievable with limited resources (11).

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