

June 11, 2007

State Representative Peter Koujouian, Chair
State Representative Susan Fargo, Chair
JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH
Room 130
State House
Boston, MA 02133

I began visiting tanning salons when I was fifteen without my parents knowledge or permission. I did not use them that often, just before the "big" milestones in my teenage life. I wanted to look good for events such as prom and graduation. I continued to use tanning beds sporadically throughout college. I went tanning before my wedding so I could look tan for my big day and have a base tan for my honeymoon in Bermuda.

My friends and I used to have a saying- "burn today, tan tomorrow." Looking back, I realize how foolish we were for not only saying that but also acting on it. We would go into a tanning bed for the first time, and no matter what, would come out with minor sunburn. We knew eventually that we would end up with that glorious tan we so craved. What we really should have said was "burn today, tan tomorrow, skin cancer in thirteen years." That is about how long it was before I was diagnosed with melanoma. I can't tell you exactly how often I used a tanning bed, but it was at least thirty times over thirteen years. I do not think that is that much, yet I developed melanoma. While there is evidence that there are safety regulations in tanning salons, no body ever enforced them with me. I was in charge of how long I stayed in the tanning bed and whether or not I used the protective eye wear.

My primary care doctor was the one who noticed the mole on the back of my leg. She immediately sent me to see a dermatologist who diagnosed it as a melanoma. I then had to have surgery to have the melanoma removed. For the past three years, I have seen my dermatologist every 3 months for regular check-ups. I do consider myself one of the lucky ones because my doctor caught it early.

While I still think that I look better with a tan, I now am much smarter about how I go about getting one. I use sunless self-tanning products often and think my tan looks authentic and healthy! I am smarter now because of my age and my big scare with melanoma. However, I wish there was someone who could have told me back then that I was intentionally putting my health at risk.

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Melanoma at 20

When I tell people I had cancer most automatically react with “but you’re so young!” or “what a terrible thing to go through so early in life.” The “being young” part may be true, and it was an experience I’ll never forget, but in hindsight I’m not so sure that it was “terrible.” I was diagnosed when I was only 20 years old, but I look back now and realize that having melanoma before I was even considered a legal adult in the U.S. was a complete blessing in disguise.

At the age of seventeen I was like most girls that age; I was insecure and uncomfortable in my own skin. As a fair featured, red head I was often teased for having such a light complexion. By the time I was a senior in high school I was fed up with being ridiculed, so I began visiting tanning booths.

Within a few weeks I had the bronze complexion that most people long for, and I was determined to stay that way. So for the next three years I went tanning once a week and hit the beaches every opportunity I had.

During my sophomore year at college and two weeks before my 20th birthday, I came home and went to my doctors for a routine physical. While I was there I pointed out a mole on my stomach that had begun to get dark and itched on occasion. My doctor casually suggested I have it removed because it looked “a little funny.”

So I quickly went in, had the mole removed and hit the tanning beds the same day. Two weeks later, when I went in to have my stitches taken out, I was informed I had Stage 2 Malignant Melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. The doctor explained that steps would now have to be taken to ensure the cancer had not spread inside my body. Here I was, 20 years old, wondering if I was going to die.

I left the doctors office in a haze and immediately began crying. I called my parents, who tried to console me, although I could hear the terror in my mother’s voice. Her 19-year-old daughter had just been told she had cancer. I still can’t imagine what that was like for her to hear.

The next two months were filled with doctor consultations, blood tests, radioactive dye injections, and the most embarrassing appointment of my life. I would be asked to stand completely naked in a doctor’s office while every inch of my body was photographed for documentation purposes.

A month later on February 14th, 2004, I would head to Wing Memorial hospital to undergo my first surgery. The procedure took three hours long, included the removal of eight lymph nodes and left me with four disfiguring scars.

After my surgery I would be forced to wait for two weeks before hearing whether or not my lymph nodes were “clear.” Eventually I received a call from my surgeon with the good news that I was cancer-free.

Relief quickly spread over the Rothschild household, but my personal struggle was far from over. In a quest to obtain unobtainable beauty I had permanently disfigured myself and the next year would be filled with endless tears and heartache. I began hating my body even more than I did in high school and I blamed myself for my poor life style choices. How could I have done this to myself? My inability to accept my body was the reason I had cancer and I couldn’t cope with my self-hatred.

In May of 2005 I was asked to write a piece on my experience for a magazine I was freelancing for in Newport, RI. I realized it was time to stop feeling sorry for myself and to help other women dealing with the same body image issues I had dealt with for years. I posed on the cover of the magazine baring nothing but my scar and wrote a two page spread detailing my story.

Since then I have been on a crusade to help stop other women from making the same mistakes I did. I have been featured in *The Newport Mercury*, *The Reminder Publication*, *The Springfield Republican*, twice in *The Hampden-Wilbraham Times*, *The Ludlow Register* and the more nationally recognized *Marie Claire Magazine*. I have also told my story on News Channel 22 twice, News Channel 40 and Fox News New York City. Also, I am scheduled to be featured in *Fitness Magazine* in June of 2007.

I currently speak publicly to local high schools, fund raising events and seminars, but my most current project involves other women who can relate to my experience.

At the age of 23 I am lucky to now understand what true beauty really is and I know now that acceptance is vital to a healthy lifestyle. I ask that you learn from my experience and start appreciating your body in its true, most beautiful form.

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June 12, 2007

RE: Bill S 1329

Dear Members of the Massachusetts State Legislature:

I am writing to express my strong support for the passage of Bill S1329. This important bill has been sponsored by the Melanoma Foundation of New England and seeks to restrict the use of tanning beds for youth under the age of 16 and require parental consent for youth between 16 and 18 years of age.

This matter is of great significance to me and my family, as well as to a growing number of young families in the Commonwealth whose lives have been devastated by melanoma. I am a two-time melanoma survivor, and was first diagnosed with when I was 28 years old. This early-stage melanoma was removed surgically and thought to be cured. However, in August 2002, when I was 32 years old and 19 weeks pregnant, I found a swollen lymph node which was biopsied and diagnosed as recurrent melanoma. I underwent surgery to remove the remaining lymph nodes in my groin, and delivered my baby early so that I could start a year-long drug treatment program which would reduce my risk for recurrence. I was told that I had a 50% chance of living long enough to see my daughter start kindergarten.

A growing body of research makes it alarmingly clear that there is an undeniable link between a person's exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, and their risk for developing skin cancer. I was exposed to a great deal of UV radiation as a teenager, both on beach vacations with my family and by visiting the tanning salon on numerous occasions. Tanning salons marketed their services to kids my age, offering student rates and package deals to sell you a "base tan" before your trip to the tropics. I don't recall ever having been warned about the dangers of UV radiation during my trips to the tanning salons.

Melanoma is a social disease. It has increased in incidence faster than any other cancer during the last half century, largely because it is strongly linked to UV radiation exposure. As much as we've heard about how damaging the sun can be, as a society Americans still seek that "healthy glow" that comes with a tan and will spend hours baking on the beach or in a tanning bed to achieve it. The truth is, there is no such thing as a healthy tan. We need to get this message out, particularly to young men and women who feel immortal and don't practice behaviors to protect their skin. More than 80% of one's lifetime sun exposure occurs by 18 years of age. **We need to put measures in place to ensure that young people are making informed decisions, with the guidance and consent of their parents, about the risk that they assume when they visit the tanning salon.**

It is now almost five years since my recurrence, and I am enormously grateful for each healthy new day that I am granted. I feel that I have a personal responsibility to elevate public awareness about the dangers of UV radiation and the consequences of spending too much time in the sun or in the tanning salon. Though I am not there in person, please know that I am deeply committed to this issue, and more than willing to speak to any Senator or Representative who seeks more information on this topic. As an active voter, I urge you to consider the consequences of this legislation for the future health of today's children.

Sincerely,

Sarah D. Aasheim