**Sunbed use and skin care in Gypsy and Traveller communities**

Samson Rattigan | June 2019

Within Gypsy and Traveller communities, image is often considered to be very important. Many people, particularly women, take good care of their appearance with regular visits to hair and nail salons, through the use of cosmetic tanning and the use of make-up. There is often a strong desire to be seen as healthy and happy and this can make sunbed usage more attractive. Through the use of questionnaires, face-to-face engagement, focus groups and online polls we sought to find out levels of sunbed usage in Gypsy and Traveller communities, awareness of the risks of sunbed use and the most effective ways of raising awareness of the dangers of sunbeds.

**Key Findings**

* There are high levels of sunbed usage in Gypsy and Traveller communities compared to the majority population.
* There are low levels of awareness of the risks of sunbeds in Irish Traveller communities compared to the majority population.
* Many members of Gypsy and Traveller communities, in particular Irish Travellers, highly value tanning as part of their beauty regime.
* Some men in the Gypsy and Traveller communities may be reluctant to use sun cream in England, despite large periods of time spent in the outdoors.
* Overwhelmingly, those we spoke to felt that it important to get messages on skin care and sunbeds out to Gypsy and Traveller communities in a targeted way.

**Recommendations**

* Public Health England should develop a targeted campaign on skin care and sunbeds for members of Gypsy and Traveller communities.
* Datasets on sunbed usage and skin cancer should include disaggregated figures on usage and prevalence for Gypsy and Traveller communities.
* Public health campaigns on cancer prevention should be co-produced with communities at high risk and be accessible for people with low literacy or experiencing digital exclusion.
* Public health campaigns on cancer prevention should include images of potential damage of UV, take place on social media and video and incorporate messages on premature ageing.
* Public health teams should raise awareness of healthy alternatives to cosmetic sunbeds amongst groups most likely to use these.

**Introduction**

The NHS Long Term Plan contains a strong commitment to strengthen its contribution to prevention and health inequalities[[1]](#footnote-1). Whilst skin care and sunbeds are not specifically mentioned in the Long Term Plan, we know that there are around 15,000 new cases of melanoma skin cancer every year in the UK and that 86% of these are preventable[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3).

According to the World Health Organisation, skin cancer is the most common form of cancer among light-skinned populations[[4]](#footnote-4). The risk of developing melanoma skin cancer is 16-25% greater amongst those who have ever used a sunbed compared to those who have never[[5]](#footnote-5). This rises to a 59% greater risk if you are under 35 years old when using your first sunbed[[6]](#footnote-6).

In recognition of the fact that sun beds place people at higher risk of developing cancer, the government and leading charities have taken steps to address this. Many of these are targeted primarily at young people. For example, the Sunbeds Regulation Act 2010 came into force on 8 April 2011 prohibiting the use of sunbeds on commercial business premises by children and young people under the age of 18. As another example, Cancer Research UK’s ‘R UV UGLY’ commissioned a touring photo booth which dispensed UV images that revealed the damage of sunbeds to the skin[[7]](#footnote-7).

**Methodology**

To assess levels of sunbed usage in Gypsy and Traveller communities, awareness of the risks of sunbed use and the most effective ways of raising awareness of the dangers of sunbeds we engaged with a total of 41 people through a questionnaire, assertive outreach, a focus group and a Facebook poll.

**Attitudes to tanning and sunbeds in Gypsy and Traveller communities**

In our focus group with ten members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities, we discussed tanning and motivations for using sunbeds. We heard that in Irish Traveller communities, it is important to have a tan because it makes you look healthier and therefore happier. We heard that respondents often saw members of their social networks checking in to tanning salons on Facebook. This was considered a sign of health, happiness and wealth. We also heard that men in Gypsy and Traveller communities may be reluctant to put on sun cream on in England as this might be seen as a sign of weakness or less macho.

The group also pointed out that members of Gypsy and Traveller communities have traditionally lived an outdoors existence and during good weather would never be sitting indoors. Participants pointed out that a significant proportion of the men in Gypsy and Traveller communities worked in labouring, building, tree surgery or in markets. All of the most common occupations were outdoor work and the men that were interviewed said they had spent a majority of their working life outdoors. There was a common belief that being outdoors would not have a negative impact on health.

**Sunbed usage and skin care in Gypsy and Traveller communities**

In our engagement with Irish Traveller women in Brighton, we spoke to 18 women. Amongst those who were under 50 years old, all 13 women reported regularly using sunbeds, whereas none of the women over the age of 50 reported using sun beds. Of the women we spoke to, two women felt that sun beds were good for their health, in particular, for psoriasis and arthritis. All of the women we spoke to felt that it was important to have a tan in the Irish Traveller community, as it shows health. The majority of women we spoke to only used sun cream in the summer.

All of the women who were under 50 reported that they were aware of some of the risks of sunbeds, but thought it unlikely it would happen to them. None of the women had been aware of the dangers of sunbeds until one woman from the group was diagnosed with skin cancer and advised by the consultant on the dangers of sun beds. The individual woman who was having treatment for skin cancer was very keen to ensure that other members of her community were given the knowledge and health messages around tanning in salons. She herself was completely unaware that they were a risk and was shocked when the consultant informed her about the very real dangers of sunbed use. She was also extremely ashamed and embarrassed about this because she felt that ‘she had brought it on herself’.

Amongst the women over 50 years old, all were concerned about sunbed use amongst younger community members and were supportive of a targeted campaign on sunbeds and sun safety in Traveller communities. They said that when they were younger the trends were more about having nice hair and regularly visiting a hair salon was seen as a sign of doing well, not tanning. The group said that, if anything, during their youth having darker skin indicated that you were working or living a very outdoors existence therefore you could be seen as being poor.

In response to our questionnaire within Gypsy and Traveller communities on skin care and sun bed usage, we found that three out of 13 respondents never wear sun cream, seven out of 13 respondents only wear sun cream in the summer and that six out of 13 respondents have used sunbeds. Three out of 13 participants said that they had considered a healthier alternative to tanning. Four out of 13 participants reported that they have had their moles checked by a health professional.

**Public health messages about sunbed usage and skin care**

In a 2010 study on sun bed use and sun care knowledge and attitudes in the majority population, researchers from the British Association of Dermatologists found that 97% of 3623 respondents had skin cancer knowledge[[8]](#footnote-8). In contrast, the majority of women we spoke to from the Irish Traveller community seemed surprised that sunbeds were a health hazard.

As a result of missed opportunities in education, some members of Gypsy and Traveller communities may miss out on public health messages and education. This may mean that some members of Gypsy and Traveller communities aren’t equipped with the information they need to make healthy choices around sunbed usage and skin care. Some members of Gypsy and Traveller communities may struggle to understand or benefit from campaigns on sunbed usage and skincare if:

* They rely on the ability to read and write, as 45% of our organisation’s service users from Gypsy and Traveller communities have low or no literacy[[9]](#footnote-9).
* They are delivered solely on digital platforms, as research carried out in 2018 found that over half of Gypsy and Traveller participants said that they did not feel confident using digital technology by themselves[[10]](#footnote-10).

Throughout our research, we asked members of Gypsy and Traveller communities what they felt was the best way to promote health messages to members of their communities. Overwhelmingly, we heard that people felt it was important that there was a targeted effort to get messages on skin cancer and sunbed usage to Gypsy and Traveller communities.

In our focus group, the majority of participants felt that it would be very hard to change attitudes towards sunbed usage in Gypsy and Traveller communities. However, one participant suggested the idea of running a social media challenge could work. The group agreed that a social media challenge which saw women from the community challenging others to go sun bed free for the month and videoing themselves with natural skin could work. We heard that a campaign should include pictures of the effects of sun damage and statistics on the negative effects of sunbeds on health. We also heard that a focus on premature ageing may improve the effectiveness of such campaigns.

In answer to our questionnaire, all 13 participants said that pictures of the negative effects of sun damage should be included in a health campaign and nine out of 13 participants said that social media would be the best way to get health messages about skin care and dangers of sunbeds to Gypsy and Traveller communities. We also designed a survey poll and posted this on a closed Facebook group for Gypsies and Travellers in Brighton and received the following responses:

As part of our assertive outreach and engagement, we carried out joint visits to Traveller sites with Albion in the Community and a local mobile spray tan provider. The women we spoke to were able to sample this, ask questions about how long the tan lasted and about how to qualify as a professional spray tanner. The young women and teenage girls were very interested and thought that if the skill was taken into their community people would use this method rather than continue using the sunbed salons. The women we spoke to were particularly animated about the mobile element of the spray tanning and that there was an employment possibility attached to this which fitted well with nomadic practices of Gypsy and Traveller communities.

**Conclusion**

Our research found that there is a clear need to develop compelling and targeted health messages on skin care and sunbed usage for Gypsy and Traveller communities. Through our engagement with over 40 members of Gypsy and Traveller communities, we uncovered higher prevalence of sunbed usage and lower awareness of the damaging effects of this. We found that many members of Gypsy and Traveller communities, in particular Irish Travellers, highly value tanning as part of their beauty regime and that some men in the Gypsy and Traveller communities may be reluctant to use sun cream in England, despite large periods of time spent in the outdoors. We found that there is a strong desire from within Gypsy and Traveller communities to learn more about skin care and cancer prevention.

**Thank you**

Thank you to everyone who participated in this piece of research and to Brighton and Hove CCG who commissioned this piece of work through the ECHO project.

**About us**

Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works on behalf of all Gypsies, Roma and Travellers regardless of ethnicity, culture or background.

fft@gypsy-traveller.org | www.gypsy-traveller.org | Twitter: @GypsyTravellers | Facebook: @FriendsFamiliesandTravellers | +44 (0) 1273 234 777

**Appendix A**

**Community background of participants**

* 9 participants from Romany Gypsy community
* 21 participants from Irish Traveller community
* 10 participants from New Traveller community
* 1 participant from Scottish Traveller community

**Age range**

* 4 participants under 18
* 9 participants were between 18-24
* 11 participants were between 25-35
* 9 participants were between 36-50
* 8 participants over 50

1. https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/nhs-long-term-plan.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/melanoma-skin-cancer/incidence [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/melanoma-skin-cancer/risk-factors#heading-Zero [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/255695/9789241512596-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/melanoma-skin-cancer/risk-factors#ref-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://hellounity.com/work/r-uv-ugly/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20716213 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/No-room-at-the-inn-findings-from-mystery-shopping-GP-practices.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Digital-Inclusion-in-Gypsy-and-Traveller-communities-FINAL-1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-10)