

The People Respond

Character: Legislator

Government office

Generally, we hope people use common sense and take care of themselves because the government can't be expected to protect everybody from everything. But children, children don't use common sense because they don't have common sense. That's why the government has to pass laws to protect children: no drinking, no cigarettes, special labor laws, and kids have to go to school. Now we have this ozone layer hole giving everybody skin cancer. People have to cover up. Kids aren't going to cover up unless we make them. I am introducing a law during the next session of the legislature to require all individuals under the age of 18 to wear headgear and clothing that covers at least 90 percent of their skin while they're outside. It's for their own good.

Character: Gardener

Standing beside a truck full of gardening equipment

Excuse me, but who does this law apply to? To the kid? To his parents? To his boss? 'Cause I'm the boss. If I hire a kid to mow lawns—for very good hourly wages, mind you—do I have to supply the cover-up clothes? Do I have to make sure the kid wears them? Do I get fined or does the kid get fined? If I have to watch and make sure these kids keep their hats on, the cheap labor will not be worth it.

Character: Lifeguard

Sitting in a lifeguard chair at the beach

There have to be exceptions. I can't be a lifeguard if I have to wear coveralls. I mean, what do I do, undress when I have to save someone? The person would drown. And what about me? I'll be hot. And nobody will get to see me in a bathing suit. How am I supposed to get a tan?

Character: School Board Representative

School office

I commend the representative for this bill. But I would ask where the responsibility for enforcement will lie. I hope it will rest in the home. The school, and the entire school district, have been asked to assume too many parental responsibilities. Our teachers can't use their valuable time checking to see if somebody is engaging in unsafe sunning. And what, may I ask, about students who can't afford cover-ups? Will the school be required to purchase them? This is a complicated and potentially very expensive problem.

Character: Dermatologist

Dermatologist's office

The incidence of both melanoma and nonmelanoma skin cancer has increased dramatically in the past two decades, probably because of our modern obsession with suntanning. The correlation between most skin cancer and sun exposure has been established for years. The people with the highest risk are the ones with

fair skin, blue eyes, light hair, lots of moles—in other words, the ones who burn easily and don't tan. Incidence of nonmelanoma skin cancers is greatest in people with a lot of regular sun exposure, like farmers or sailors. On the other hand, incidence of melanomas is greater for people who work indoors. The leading explanation is that occasional intense exposure is the cause—like the burn an office worker might get during vacation. I urge my patients to do self-exams and to have regular physicals so that we catch the disease early so we can cure it.

Character: Insurance Company Representative

Insurance office

We have to start to contain our skyrocketing health care costs. The insurance companies are very concerned about saving the consumer money. Sure, we could offer lower rates to fully dressed people, but isn't it easier if it's the law? People might be frustrated at first, but then they'll start to like it, just like they did when wearing seat belts became law. If we can eliminate a few thousand cases of skin cancer by making kids cover up, we'll have the resources to deal with other pressing health issues that can't be prevented. Then, if this law is successful, we can legislate against other unhealthy behavior, like smoking.

Character: High School Track Star

The track

This law can't apply to me. I'm trying to break an outdoor record. I can't do that in cover-ups. My muscles can't be bunched up and confined; they must be free. And the heat and the weight of all those extra clothes. And the wind resistance. Even a hat makes extra wind resistance. I know a guy who lost a race 'cause his headband caught the air and slowed him down. Really.

Character: Tanning Buff

By an outside pool

What's important to you? Your car? Your music? Your friends? Well, my tan is important to me. It tells me who I am. I work hard on it, and people say, "Nice tan," and I feel good. I know it's a small thing, but it's my self-esteem. I need this tan, and nobody has the right to take it away from me. And you know what? If they make it illegal for me to get to the beach, I'll go to a tanning booth. They're not illegal yet.

Character: Person with Dark Skin

At a bus stop

This law is too broad. I don't tan and I don't burn; I am immune to it. So, why should I have to drape myself in all kinds of ridiculous extra clothing? Make a law for the pale people. Leave my people alone.

Character: Pediatrician

Doctor's office

We think that children are immune to cancer, that it's an old person's disease. Well, childhood is where it starts. Sunburn at an early age increases the incidence of skin cancer—the more frequent and earlier the sunburn, the more likely the chance of skin cancer. Personally, I would like to make sure that this law has teeth and that it specifically targets students in public schools where they can be taught and controlled. Parents don't know what their kids are up to. The teachers are better educated and more likely to consistently protect the kids.

Character: Fashion Historian

Academic office

The Western standard of beauty hasn't always been the even tan. Historically, pale skin was the standard. Pale skin meant you had others to do your work, tend your fields. It meant wealth. And because the wealthy people were setting the standard, it also meant beauty. Rich people who didn't have pale skin lightened it with powder or other make-up. This same set of values appeared throughout the world, wherever there were pale people, from the Mediterranean to the Far East. Dark skin became a sign of inferiority, which figured into slavery and racism in the New World. Now, of course, dark skin, a tan, is the sign of the leisurely life. Now we have the white people flocking to the beaches or the tanning salons to darken their skin, some even painting on artificial tans. A pale skin means you're some kind of peasant working in the basement . . .

Character: Motorcycle Rider

Parking lot, next to a motorcycle

I don't wear a helmet because it's the law; I wear it because I don't want to get hurt if I fall. I ride my bike because it's a great way to get to work; other people ride because it's their personal self-expression. They don't want to wear a helmet, and I don't think they should have to. Same with sunscreen and big-brimmed hats. If that's how somebody wants to dress, fine. But don't force people.

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