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The pathology report is clear and unmistakable; for the second time in a month, another young person in their early twenties has been diagnosed with malignant melanoma. As the medical providers of North Idaho Dermatology discuss the findings, they are all reminded of patients they have known, patients who became friends, who have become a part of their lives. They think of a young woman in the prime of her life with a young child. They think of the boy, just entering his teens. They think of the middle-aged mother, the grandfather of 17, and so many others. Unfortunately, these kinds of experiences are becoming more frequent in North Idaho and the surrounding area. In August of this year, the Cancer Data Registry of Idaho announced the startling news that our state had become #1 in the nation for per-capita melanoma deaths, and seventh-highest in the incident of melanoma. When Dr. Stephen Craig began his dermatology practice in Coeur d'Alene 10 years ago this week, he knew he would be diagnosing skin cancers. But perhaps nothing could have quite prepared him for the toll that melanoma has taken on so many, especially young people and their families. And for Dr. Craig and his associates, the fight against melanoma is a personal mission. Of all the melanomas diagnosed in the state of Idaho, his practice diagnoses a third of them.

“If melanoma is detected early, if it is still in its initial stages, it can be cured simply by removing it.” Dr. Craig explains. “But, even after that, there is a risk of the cancer coming back, and that risk increases with the depth of the tumor. The deeper the tumor goes into the skin, or if it has spread to the lymph nodes, the more likely it is that the cancer comes back. And, most unfortunately, if melanoma has spread to other tissues and organs, the cure rate is pretty low. When melanoma spreads that far, it's pretty hard to stop, and it usually ends in death.”

When asked why the melanoma rates in Idaho are so high, Dr. Craig explains: “There are a large number of factors involved, so it probably isn't just one thing, but an unfortunate combination of factors. Some of these factors include our high incidence of Caucasian population, our relatively high altitude and latitude, and the fact that in North Idaho, our exposure to sun comes in short but high doses.”

Sunscreen, protective clothing, and avoiding sun exposure are the most important ways to minimize your risk of developing melanoma, but for those who may already have melanoma, “Early detection is everything.” says Dr. Craig. “If a person will perform a thorough self-examination monthly, and schedule a formal skin exam with a dermatologist yearly, they could very well save their life.”

Dr. Stephen Craig is the owner of North Idaho Dermatology, which was established in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho November 17th, 1999.