

# Letters

## RESEARCH LETTER

### The Risk of Melanoma in Pilots and Cabin Crew: UV Measurements in Flying Airplanes

Recently, a meta-analysis reported an increased incidence of melanoma in pilots and cabin crew, which was possibly due to occupational exposures.<sup>1</sup> Cabin crews' exposure to cosmic radiation was assessed in different studies and always found below the allowed dose limit.<sup>2</sup> However, the cumulative exposure of pilots and cabin crew to UV radiation, a known risk factor for melanoma, has not been assessed to our knowledge.

Airplane windshields are commonly made of polycarbonate plastic or multilayer composite glass. UV-B (280-320 nm) transmission through both plastic and glass windshields was reported to be less than 1%. However, UV-A (320-380 nm) transmission ranged from 0.41% to 53.5%, with plastic attenuating more UV radiation than glass.<sup>3</sup>

Intrigued by our findings and the clinical observation of pilots developing melanomas on sun-exposed skin, we measured the amount of UV radiation in airplane cockpits during flight and compared them with measurements performed in tanning beds.

**Methods** | UV radiation measurements were performed using a Solartech UV index meter designed to measure UV radiation from 280 to 400 nm (UV-B and UV-A) and a Solartech UV index meter designed to measure UV-B only (280-322 nm) (Solartech Inc). We first measured UV radiation in the pilot seat inside a general aviation turboprop airplane (Socata TBM850) through the acrylic plastic windshield (1.6-cm thick) at ground level and at 2500, 6000, 10 000, 15 000, 20 000, 25 000, and 30 000 feet above sea level. The measurements were taken in 2 locations with different solar exposures: San Jose, California, and Las Vegas, Nevada, around midday in April. Later, the same meters were used to measure UV radiation levels in an Omega UV-A tanning bed. The study design has been re-

viewed and approved by the Committee on Human Research, University of California, San Francisco.

**Results** | Our measurements inside the airplane revealed that the windshields blocked UV-B but allowed UV-A transmission. The amount of UV-A at 30 000 feet measured in Las Vegas, Nevada, was approximately 242  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$  (Table 1). The UV-A dose in a UV-A-only tanning bed was 706  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$ . The carcinogenic effective dose was calculated using the Skin Cancer Utrecht-Philadelphia human action spectrum,<sup>4</sup> and the dose for a 20-minute tanning session was 2940  $\text{mJ}/\text{m}^2$ . The carcinogenic effective doses of UV-A radiation in tanning beds and airplanes are compared in Table 2.

**Discussion** | The pathogenic role of UV-A in melanoma is well established. UV-A is capable of causing DNA damage in cell culture<sup>5</sup> and in animal models.<sup>6</sup> Pilots flying for 56.6 minutes at 30 000 feet receive the same amount of UV-A carcinogenic effective radiation as that from a 20-minute tanning bed session. These levels could be significantly higher when flying over thick cloud layers and snow fields, which could reflect up to 85% of UV radiation. Airplane windshields do not completely block UV-A radiation and therefore are not enough to protect pilots. UV-A transmission inside airplanes can play a role in pilots' increased risk of melanoma.

We recommend further studies to establish recommendations for occupation-related UV radiation dose limits. These studies should include more precise measurement in several

Table 2. UV-A Carcinogenic Effective Doses in Airplanes and in Tanning Beds

Location	Carcinogenic Effective Irradiance, $\text{mW}/\text{m}^2$	Time to Receive the UV-A Dose of a Tanning Bed Session, 2940 $\text{J}/\text{m}^2$ , min
Inside tanning bed	2.45	20.00
In pilot seat at 30 000 ft	0.87	56.60

Table 1. UV Measurements Performed at Pilot Seat Inside a Socata TBM850 at Different Altitudes

Altitude, ft	San Jose, CA (49 ft) <sup>a</sup>		Las Vegas, NV (2030 ft) <sup>a</sup>	
	UV-A and UV-B, $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$	UV-B only, $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$	UV-A and UV-B, $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$	UV-B only, $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$
Ground level	137	0	127	0
2500	135	0	128	0
6000	138	0	132	0
10 000	189	0	182	0
15 000	228	0	NA	0
20 000	234	0	212	0
25 000	250	0	210	0
30 000	NA	0	242	0

Abbreviation: NA, not available.

<sup>a</sup> Measurements in parentheses indicate height above sea level.

airplanes. We believe that better UV protection on aircraft windshields is necessary to offer cabin crew a hazard-free work environment. We strongly recommend the use of sunscreens and periodical skin checks for pilots and cabin crew.

**Martina Sanlorenzo, MD**  
**Igor Vujic, MD**  
**Christian Posch, MD**  
**James E. Cleaver, PhD**  
**Pietro Quaglino, MD**  
**Susana Ortiz-Urda, MD, PhD**

**Author Affiliations:** Department of Dermatology, Mount Zion Cancer Research Center, University of California, San Francisco (Sanlorenzo, Vujic, Posch, Cleaver, Ortiz-Urda); Department of Medical Sciences, University of Turin, Turin, Italy (Quaglino).

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**Corresponding Author:** Martina Sanlorenzo, MD, Department of Dermatology, Mount Zion Cancer Research Center, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA 94115 (martina.sanlorenzo@hotmail.it).

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*Study concept and design:* Sanlorenzo, Ortiz-Urda.

*Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data:* All authors.

*Drafting of the manuscript:* Sanlorenzo, Vujic, Cleaver, Ortiz-Urda.

*Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content:* Sanlorenzo, Vujic, Posch, Quaglino, Ortiz-Urda.

*Statistical analysis:* Sanlorenzo.

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*Study supervision:* Posch, Quaglino, Ortiz-Urda.

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