

Ask the doctor February 2016: The mammography controversy heats up:...1/30/16.

It was only a few years ago when every woman was encouraged to have a yearly mammogram starting at age 40. These screening guidelines are currently under assault. A government task force (USPSTF) now recommends starting mammograms at age 50 and repeating them every other year until age 74, at which time women are being advised to stop mammographic screening.

This recommendation is absurd. Approximately 25% of all breast cancer deaths occur in women in their 40's. How could a governmental committee write off the very group of women who have the most years of life to gain with early detection?

Multiple well designed research studies have shown unequivocally that screening women in their forties results in a dramatic reduction in breast cancer mortality.

For reasons that are not well understood, the task force chose to largely ignore the findings from the many studies that demonstrated the value of starting screening at age 40. Instead they seemed to put more emphasis on a study from Canada that "proved" mammographic screening didn't work.

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This study went on to conclude that 20% of breast cancers will disappear spontaneously if not treated. This is a remarkable conclusion considering that never in the history of medicine has there been a single case of a breast cancer disappearing without treatment. (There have been rare cases of “spontaneous regression” for other cancers including melanoma and some kidney cancers).

The concept of 20% of breast cancers disappearing without treatment is beyond comprehension. The real explanation for the disproportionate share of deaths among women receiving mammographic screening is quite simple. More women with suspicious breast lumps were placed into the group of women who were to receive yearly mammographic screening.

Rather than admitting that the results of the first Canadian study were flawed, the task force “experts” accepted them without question.

If you have any doubt about the inherent bias of the task force, just listen to what happened when a second study from Canada was reported. The second study corrected the flaws in the original study. The study randomized patients fairly. Modern equipment was used and both physicians and technologists were well-trained.

The second study concluded that screening women in their 40’s resulted in a 30% reduction in breast cancer mortality. The “experts”

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chose to basically ignore the results of the second study that did not support their inherent bias against starting breast cancer screening at age 40.

Unfortunately, the Komen Foundation and the American Cancer society are adding to the confusion by submitting their watered down guidelines. We are going in the wrong direction when it comes to the early detection of breast cancer.

This is so ironic considering that major technologic progress has been made in detecting breast cancers that are missed on screening. Widespread application of this new technology could dramatically improve breast cancer survival rates, but tragically only a small percentage of women who could benefit from this new technology are receiving it.

Next month's issue of "Ask the Doctor" will focus on the new advances in technology that will allow us to detect more small breast cancers on screening and have the potential to save thousands of lives each year.

If you have any questions: Contact us at: beawarefoundation.org