

August 2005

Save Our (Modified) Sweat Glands!

A recent study concluded that **mammograms don't save lives**. (Other studies have determined that mammograms **don't save money either** – more on that later.) The July 20th issue of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute reports that women who have regular mammograms die from breast cancer just as often as women who skip them.

How could this be?

- ✓ The **quality of mammogram reading at community-based providers is poor**. Few providers could afford computer-aided detection systems which have been proven to find more cancer. Besides, payers are unlikely to agree to pay more for a better service.
- ✓ The **error rate of mammograms is high**, even at academic medical centers. One study found that women ages 40 to 49 had a 52.2% chance of discovering breast cancer within two years of having a “clean” mammogram. They have a 27.7% chance of discovering cancer within a year of a clean mammogram. (Mammograms have a better error rate for women over age 50. Still, older women have a 24.7% chance of getting breast cancer within two years of a clean mammogram.)

Mammograms are not a cost effective means to prevent breast cancer deaths. One study estimates that in order to prevent one cancer death 14 years later, 1224 mammograms are required. For women younger than 50, 1792 mammograms are required.

But isn't it cheaper to catch and treat breast cancer early? The short answer is no.

Here is the longer answer. The more mammograms we get, the more cancers we find – and the more cancers we find that are clinically insignificant. More women then get treatment for cancers that are not aggressive and that may have regressed naturally. The result is much more treatment and medical expense than is necessary. This cycle of over diagnosis and over treatment feeds itself. Meanwhile, we congratulate ourselves for saving lives when all we have done is spend money.

Despite the scientific evidence, mammograms still get the promotion fanfare perhaps because the National Committee on Quality Assurance (NCQA) includes them as a

measure of health plan quality. **Employers who want to make their health plan truly effective need to examine these widely held myths.** Call us if one of these employers is your client.

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