

GOV'T HEALTH CARE - REDUCE COSTS BY LIMITING ACCESS!

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-Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982
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Today's debate: Breast cancer

New mammogram advice invites deadly consequences

Our view:
Sudden shift in guidance threatens to undercut benefits of screening.

Any woman who has had a mammogram knows that it's an iffy, worry-inducing test. The scans sometimes miss tumors, and they sometimes mistake harmless images for cancer. But women 40 and older, following standard medical advice, go ahead and get them

anyway because there isn't any better way to detect breast cancer early. Better to risk a false positive than not to discover a lesion that can kill you.

Or so went the thinking until Monday, when an influential federal task force turned that reasoning on its head. It repudiated the mantra that doctors and public-health advocates have been chanting for years: Do a self-exam once a month. Get a mammogram annually.

The task force now says that most women in their 40s don't need routine annual mammograms and that older women can cut back to every other year. The independent panel of doctors also recommends against teaching women how to examine their breasts.

In other words, women should just chill out. The task force's rationale — which hasn't been embraced by the medical establishment — is that yearly exams and self-screening leave too many women needlessly anxious and prompt unnecessary follow-up procedures. The few lives that are saved by screening, says the committee, don't justify the strain on everyone else. Women, a task force member says, should be aware of those limitations before getting a mammogram.

Of course they should. And for the most part, they are, which has to leave you wondering why the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force felt compelled to trot out recommendations that invite devastating consequences:

▶ More cancers will go undetected. Granted, the committee has some math on its side. It says that only one life is saved for every 1,904 mammograms of women in their 40s, so the vast majority are wasting their time. But try telling that to the women whose lives were saved by early detection. Many women already find mammograms uncomfortable and intimidating; they only need a little shove to decide against having them. Is this really the direction the country

wants to move on a disease that is expected to kill more than 40,000 women this year?

▶ Not all breast cancers are equal. Some are extremely aggressive, in fact so aggressive that getting an exam every two years instead of every one will in some cases make a life-and-death difference.

▶ While the task force says its recommendations have nothing to do with insurance coverage, its advice could well spur insurers to

cut back coverage for annual screenings, particularly for women younger than 50. That could leave some women with a family history of cancer or other risks left to fight for a needed mammogram.

Breast cancer is not the only place this sort of reasoning is being applied. Recent studies of PSA screening for prostate cancer suggest that the collective benefit does not justify routinely testing every man older than 50, as is done today. But you won't find many 50-plus urologists opting not to test themselves. When a simple blood test can save your life, who cares about averages?

Similar logic is also sure to be widely applied in other areas as the country tries to rein in runaway medical costs.

On an academic level, this is interesting and potentially useful. It might lead to better tests, or fewer tests, in non-life threatening circumstances. But if you're only one patient trying to detect a deadly disease, it's just something to muse about — on your way to getting your mammogram.

Age differential

Studies show that mammograms save more lives among older women than younger women. Number of screenings needed to prevent one breast cancer death, by age group:

39-49	1,904
50-59	1,339
60-69	337

Source: U.S. Preventive Services Task Force
 By Veronica Salazar, USA TODAY

GOV'T STUDY
 (you paid for this)

Don't let a gov't panel deny your mom her annual mammogram

Who is to blame?

our "wise" panel of bureaucrats.

This is the start of gov't health care rationing

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 OUR MOMS, WIVES,
 DAUGHTERS, SISTERS
 DESERVE BETTER

GOV'T SAYS:
 WITHHOLDING INFO
 THAT COULD HELP
 YOU DETECT BREAST
 CANCER IS IN YOUR
 BEST INTEREST

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