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MEDIA RELEASE

22 September 2010

Health groups concerned about breast thermography

Key health groups are expressing concern about the use of thermography as a breast cancer screening or diagnostic tool, following an increase in queries from women and GPs.

Thermography is the recording of heat distribution in order to form an image, or thermogram, of the temperature distribution on the surface of the body, and has been promoted as a tool for the early detection of breast cancer.

The National Screening Unit, the Cancer Society of New Zealand, the New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation and the New Zealand Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists don't support the use of thermography as a breast cancer screening or diagnostic tool, because there is insufficient evidence to do so.

National Screening Unit spokesperson, Dr Julia Peters, says the organisations are concerned about the increasing promotion of thermography as a breast cancer screening option and a way to detect early breast cancer.

"As a result of this promotion, health groups are increasingly receiving queries from women and GPs seeking information on the effectiveness of thermography.

"We are concerned that women who undergo thermography may delay visiting their doctor with a significant breast cancer symptom, or not have a mammogram because they believe thermography is an adequate replacement."

Sarah Penno from the Cancer Society of New Zealand says some advertising claims thermography is a 'breakthrough', but this is not the case.

"It was used in the 1960s and 70s with poor results. And a 2003 independent review of the international literature on its effectiveness concluded that there was not enough evidence to support the role of thermography for either population screening or diagnostic testing of breast cancer."

She says these conclusions are consistent with recommendations of other key international professional groups.

"The American Medical Association states that the use of thermography for diagnostic purposes cannot be recommended, and thermography is not used in either the United Kingdom, European or Australian breast cancer screening programmes."

Breast and general surgeon Dr Belinda Scott says she has seen women who have been reassured by thermography when in fact they have a clear cancer on mammography.

"This is extremely upsetting for these women who then need surgery for an invasive disease and may have had their diagnosis delayed because of the reassurance from a normal thermogram."

Dr Mike Baker of the New Zealand Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists has had similar experiences.

“Increasingly, I am seeing women with breast cancer who have had a clear thermogram. I am also seeing women told following a thermogram that they are likely to have breast cancer, when they don’t. This is also extremely distressing.”

Dr Julia Peters from the NSU says the group believes providers of breast thermography must fully inform women of the potential harms of thermography.

“This includes providing information about the likelihood of false positive and false negative results, how much it costs, and the lack of proof of its effectiveness as a screening tool.”

She says women aged 45 to 69 are encouraged to take advantage of New Zealand’s national breast screening programme BreastScreen Aotearoa.

“Unlike thermography, breast screening offered as part of this programme is proven to reduce a woman’s risk of dying of breast cancer, and is free to all eligible women.”

For further information

Jude Cooney, National Screening Unit, 021 223 5661

About BreastScreen Aotearoa

Free breast screening for women aged 45 to 69 years is provided by the national breast screening programme, BreastScreen Aotearoa.

The aim of breast screening is to find very small cancers before a lump can be found on the breast. Early treatment has the best chance of success.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in New Zealand women.

The risk of developing breast cancer increases with age. Breast cancer is uncommon in women under 50. For older women, breast screening using mammography (breast x-rays) followed by appropriate treatment is the best way of reducing the chance of dying from breast cancer.

To make an appointment for a mammogram, or to join the programme, women can call the freephone number 0800 270 200. More information about BreastScreen Aotearoa is also available at www.nsu.govt.nz.