

Breast cancer survival rates jump

'Screening works'

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A new report showing a 25% drop in Canada's breast cancer death rate should convince women frightened of mammography that breast screening saves lives, doctors say.

"This says that screening works, that women should have screening and we're not getting that message across," said Dr. Paula Gordon, a professor at the University of British Columbia and senior radiologist in the breast health program at BC Women's Hospital.

"Not only is it validation, it even underestimates the mortality reduction that is possible with screening."

A special report in the latest Canadian Cancer Statistics, to be released today by the Canadian Cancer Society, shows the death rate for breast cancer for Canadian women has fallen 25% since 1986, when organized breast screening programs began being rolled out across the country.

"A 25% reduction is really quite startling," said Heather Logan, director of cancer control policy at the cancer society.

As well, women are surviving longer: The five-year survival rate is now 86%, meaning that of all the women diagnosed with breast cancer today, 86 out of every 100 will be alive five years from now.

Ms. Logan traced falling death rates to more and better breast screening, wider use of post-surgery drugs such as tamoxifen and Herceptin and more tolerable chemotherapy regimens.

But Dr. Gordon believes fewer women are dying of breast cancer not so much because of better treatment, but better screening.

"Once a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, she's given the same therapy whether she found the lump or whether it was picked up on screening," she said.

"Obviously, the therapy is getting better, but the earlier you find the cancer the better the therapy has to work," Dr. Gordon said.

Mammography can pick up tumours as small as two millimetres, or the size of an orange seed.

Dr. Gordon said a recent article in a woman's magazine "brought up all these old myths, about how we're only saving one life in X-number [of screens], and that there's radiation risk and that women are being frightened by an abnormal screen and for the number of lives we're saving look at all the women we're scaring.

"It's really condescending," Dr. Gordon said. "When we do find the cancer, that's where we're showing a significant impact on mortality."

A recent report from B.C. found a 40% reduction in mortality in screened women compared with non-screened women. But across Canada, as few as 34% of eligible women -- those aged 50 to 69 -- had a mammogram in the past two years, as is recommended.

Screening will find "abnormalities," the vast majority of which are not cancer, Dr. Gordon said. "Women have to go into the screen knowing there's a good possibility they'll get called back. We might have [to try] an ultrasound or more mammogram pictures before we're sure. But better that they should go through that process than not attend screening at all."

Overall, the list of cancers that are decreasing at more than 2% per year is long and growing, according to Canadian Cancer Statistics 2007. They include deaths from testicular cancer, Hodgkin's lymphoma, stomach, larynx, prostate and lung cancer in men, and cancers of the cervix and stomach in women.

But the total number of new cancer cases and deaths continue to climb as the population ages and grows. The report estimates there will be 159,900 new cases of cancer, and 72,700 deaths this year. About one out of every four Canadians will die from cancer.

Death rates for most cancers have stabilized or fallen since 1994 with the exception of lung cancer in women and liver cancer in men, according to the report.

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