

The risks of mammograms

Mammograms shown to increase risks of breast cancer. Twice!

by Chris Woollams

1 Life-saving research supporting mammograms found to be flawed

You may have read research from the Nordic Cochrane Center in Copenhagen before. It is usually the 'expert and prestigious centre' cited for the latest vitamin bashing study in the tabloid press. However, when it concludes something against the cancer industry, its findings are barely reported. So don't be surprised if you have not read the following before.

A major plank of support in the 'mammograms save lives' debate has been a 2005 study where a drive to screen women in Denmark with mammography was claimed to have reduced breast cancer deaths in Copenhagen by 25 per cent.

Now scientists from the Nordic Cochrane Center in Copenhagen and the Folkehelseinstituttet in Oslo have re-examined this study along with additional data and found it flawed. In fact the corrected conclusions are exactly the opposite: **'Deaths from breast cancer were lower in areas where women didn't undergo those screening tests'**.

This time the researchers used a control group of non-screened women and analysed the malignancy data for ten years before and ten years after the screening programme was introduced. The results showed that deaths from breast cancer declined by 1 per cent in women between the ages of 55 and 74 in the screening areas but 2 per cent in non-screening areas! In younger women, breast cancer mortality went down by 5 per cent each year in the screened areas but over 6 per cent in the non-screened areas. The 'highly respected, prestigious and expert' Nordic Cochrane Center in Copenhagen concluded 'We were unable to find an effect of the Danish screening program on breast cancer mortality' (British Medical Journal).

Chris' Comment: We have told you before of the risks of screening mammograms and we have a full review on our web site on the subject (Screening mammograms –increasing the risk of cancer?). One focal study (published in the Journal of the American Medical Association's Archives of Internal Medicine) showed that an increased incidence of breast cancer occurred with the advent of screening mammograms in Europe. Cancer experts immediately rushed to comment, 'Look how screening mammograms help find these early stage cancers'. You may feel they are talking rubbish.

We have also covered Norwegian research in icon that showed, across a six year period, a group of women who had regular screening mammograms had significantly more cancers than the identical control group having none. (Far from concluding that mammograms were dangerous, the researchers concluded that, left alone, early cancers could heal themselves!!?)

Then we told you about research by Johns Hopkins (Journal of the National Cancer Institute) on women with breast cancer genetic issues - the very group who are told by experts that they have to be extremely watchful and should be screened regularly. This group actually develops higher rates of breast cancer if they have regular screening mammograms than the at risk girls that don't. So much for screening as a prevention tool.

We have also covered recent research that shows most mammograms only pick up a tumour when it has reached a size corresponding to at least 20 cell divisions. At around 40 divisions, you lose your fight with cancer. So 20 divisions is hardly 'early diagnosis' (We are hopeful that mammograms may soon be replaced by new simple blood tests that catch a cancer in its very first divisions). Now the Nordic Cochrane Center in Copenhagen say one of the major planks of the 'mammograms save lives' argument is false.

But that's not all. It has long been understood that radiation causes cell damage and can increase mutation and cancer risk. Now read on....

2 Radiation increases breast cancer risk

Researchers at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in America (a US Government facility) have shown that radiation both changes the environment around breast cells and increases the risks of mutation in them; a mutation that can be passed on in cell division.

"Our work shows that radiation can change the microenvironment of breast cells, and this in turn can allow the growth of abnormal cells with a long-lived phenotype that have a much greater potential to be cancerous," said Paul Yaswen, a cell biologist and breast cancer research specialist with Berkeley Lab's Life Sciences Division, adding "Many in the cancer research community, especially radiobiologists, have been slow to acknowledge and incorporate in their work the idea that cells in human tissues are not independent entities, but are highly communicative with each other and with their microenvironment."

The results, (published in the on-line journal Breast Cancer Research), showed that a culture of healthy breast cancer cells stopped dividing four to six weeks after exposure, causing premature cell aging and allowing pre-cancerous cells caused by the radiation to infill the spaces around them. Normal healthy cells generate substances that prevent this in-fill. Thus radiation negatively effects the environment around breast cells.

Research has also shown that radiation can increase breast cancer malignancy by affecting a tumour-suppressing gene (p16).

Chris' Comment: When you read all this it is no wonder women are becoming increasingly scared about the risks of screening mammograms. Especially when the cancer authorities and charities bang on claiming 'the screening programme saves lives'. Personally, I would not squeeze my private parts between two cold metal plates and have them irradiated in the vague hope that someone might spot a 4-year old cancer. Bring on the advanced diagnostic blood tests and send these screening machines to the scrap heap.

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