

Position Statement on Breast Awareness

October 2008

Position

The National Screening Unit (NSU), the Cancer Society of New Zealand and The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation recommend all women, especially those over the age of 40, be 'breast aware'. If a woman notices a change in one breast, she should see her family doctor without delay.

Health professionals should advise women to be 'breast aware' and inform them about changes that may indicate cancer. In being 'breast aware', women should:

- know what is normal for them
- know what changes to look and feel for
- report changes without delay to their family doctor
- attend mammography screening if appropriate for their age group.

The NSU, the Cancer Society of New Zealand and The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation do not recommend the practice of regular breast self-examination (BSE), a formal and structured technique for feeling for breast changes. There is no evidence of the effectiveness of BSE in reducing mortality, and BSE may increase the chance of having a benign breast biopsy.

Background

In New Zealand women, breast cancer is the most common cancer, and the leading cause of cancer death. Each year in New Zealand, over 2300 women develop breast cancer and around 640 die from it. A woman's chance of developing breast cancer increases with age. Approximately 70% percent of women who are diagnosed with breast cancer are 50 years of age or over. Breast cancer is uncommon in women under the age of 40 (approximately 6% of diagnoses). Of those who die from breast cancer, over 80 percent are 50 years of age or over¹.

Age appropriate mammography is the only screening test that has been shown in randomised controlled trials to reduce breast cancer mortality. Mammography is thought to be effective because early detection can allow treatment prior to regional and/or systemic metastases. However, as well as the potential life-saving benefit, there are disadvantages of mammography. These include false negative cancers which are those that were not detected on the mammogram, and may present as a symptom in between regular screening examinations. Women therefore

need to be aware that mammography will not detect every breast cancer and even after a normal screening mammogram, women should see their family doctor, without delay, for investigation of breast symptoms or changes.

Why not Breast Self-Examination?

In the past, many health professionals recommended that women practise breast self-examination on a regular basis, usually every month. BSE is a formal, structured technique by which women feel for breast lumps and/or changes in their breasts. In recent years, BSE has tended to be promoted among younger women, in whom alternative screening methods (e.g. mammography) are relatively ineffective. Also, BSE has been seen as a way of empowering women, allowing them to take responsibility for their own health.

Evidence from meta-analyses (Kosters and Gotzsche 2003²; Hackshaw and Paul 2003³; Humphrey et al 2002⁴) and randomised controlled trials (Thomas et al 2002⁵; Semiglazov et al 2003⁶) showed that BSE did not result in a reduction in the size or stage of tumours at diagnosis, or a decrease in mortality from breast cancer. This was despite regular training of women in the practice of BSE and reminders to do so. The Hackshaw and Paul (2003) meta-analysis, which reviewed evidence from both observational studies and randomised controlled trials, also concluded that BSE is ineffective in saving lives, even as a method of screening to be used in between mammographic examinations³.

Critics of the above studies suggest the use of commercially available soft transparent polyurethane palpation pads could increase the sensitivity of BSE. A study in 2006 (von Georgi⁷) showed the use of palpation pads resulted in significantly poorer lump detection.

Results of the two randomised controlled trials of mortality undertaken in Shanghai (Thomas et al 2002⁵) and Russia (Semiglazov et al 2003⁶) also showed that BSE is likely to result in a considerable increase in the number of women without breast cancer who have a biopsy with its associated anxiety, but no benefit (Hackshaw and Paul 2003³). Thomas et al (2002⁵) therefore recommend women who choose to practise BSE should be informed that its efficacy is unproven and it may increase their chances of having a benign breast biopsy.

Retrospective research from a New Zealand Breast Clinic (Meechan et al 2003⁸) found that although the majority of women practised BSE, 65% of significant changes were not detected during BSE, but were found by chance. Also, 14% of women referred to the South Auckland Breast Clinic had waited over 90 days before seeing their doctor after self-detecting a breast symptom. There was no difference in delay between those who performed BSE and those who did not.

Focus group research in New Zealand found many women did not feel confident doing BSE but were more confident about doing 'casual' checks (O'Halloran and Kalafatellis 1996⁹). Women were comfortable with the 'get to know your breasts' concept. The research concluded that the message of familiarity would encourage what women were already doing and hopefully give them confidence.

Breast Awareness

Many breast cancers are found by women themselves, even in countries like New Zealand that have a mammographic screening programme. Most of these changes are discovered by chance, for example, when women are dressing or showering.

A delay of more than three months between onset of symptoms and treatment has been shown to reduce five-year survival (Richards et al 1999¹⁰). It is therefore important that women are able to recognise these symptoms and seek medical advice as soon as possible.

In the absence of evidence that routine, systematic BSE reduces deaths from breast cancer, a number of international health organisations now recommend that women look and feel for breast changes as part of general body awareness and health care. This could be done while dressing or showering, so women become familiar with their breasts and how they change at different times of the month as well as with age. This is so they become aware of any changes from what is normal for them. This concept is known as 'breast awareness' (Austoker 1994¹¹).

In being 'breast aware', women should:

- know what is normal for them
- know what changes to look and feel for

References

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For further information visit:

The National Screening Unit, BreastScreen Aotearoa www.breastscreen.govt.nz
The Cancer Society of New Zealand www.cancernz.org.nz
The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation www.nzbcf.org.nz

- report changes without delay to their family doctor
- attend mammography screening if appropriate for their age group.

Changes in the breast that may indicate cancer:

- a new lump or thickening
- a change in breast shape or size
- pain in the breast that is unusual
- puckering or dimpling of the skin
- any change in one nipple, such as:
 - a turned-in nipple
 - a discharge that occurs without squeezing
- a rash or reddening of the skin that appears only on the breast.

If a woman notices any change in one breast that is unusual for her, she should see her family doctor without delay.

Health professionals should advise women to be 'breast aware' and inform them about the changes that may indicate cancer.

Conclusion

The NSU, the Cancer Society of New Zealand and The New Zealand Breast Cancer Foundation do not recommend breast self-examination (BSE) as a method of screening for the early detection of breast cancer, because:

- there is no evidence that doing BSE will reduce a woman's chance of dying from breast cancer
- BSE can lead to anxiety and unnecessary breast biopsies, particularly among younger women.

Instead of BSE, all women, especially those over the age of 40, are advised that as part of general body awareness, if they notice a change in one breast they should see their family doctor without delay.

Women should be advised that age appropriate mammography is the only screening test that has been proven to reduce breast cancer deaths.

Health professionals should advise women to be 'breast aware' and inform them about the changes that may indicate cancer.