Q&As about the position statement addressing the harms of population breast screening

September 2014

# Why has the NSU developed this position statement?

The National Screening Unit (NSU) is committed to ensuring women have full and balanced information about the benefits and harms of screening, in order to be able to make informed decisions about participating in the national screening programme. The position statement was developed to inform conversations between women and their primary care practitioners.

The NSU has received questions from health professionals, in light of recent publications critical of breast screening and long-standing international debate, about the benefits versus harms of breast cancer screening and the communication of harms as part of screening programmes.

# How was the position statement developed?

The statement outlines the NSU’s commitment to providing balanced information, noting that the benefits of breast screening are often discussed more than the harms.

It examines the major international reviews of mammography screening, concluding that recent analyses of observational data provide the most relevant evidence for New Zealand.

The position statement was independently reviewed by the National Health Committee (NHC). In the NHC’s opinion, the position statement provides a balanced assessment of recent key evidence with regards to the harms of population mammographic breast screening. The NHC’s full response can be found at <http://nhc.health.govt.nz/committee-publications/nhc-independent-advice-nsu-position-statement-addressing-harms-population>.



# Who is the position statement for?

It is for general practitioners (GPs) and other primary healthcare professionals, in order for them to have informed conversations with their patients about participation in the BreastScreen Aotearoa (BSA) programme. The statement is intended for GPs to answer questions and for women to feel they have all the information they need in order to make a decision about participating in breast screening.

The NSU is working with the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners to ensure health professionals in primary care are aware of the position statement. The position statement will be supported by a review of BSA materials to ensure that both benefits and harms are adequately explained in all materials.

# Why is screening still recommended?

The statement recommends eligible women participate in the national breast screening programme because, for most women, the benefits of participation outweigh the harms. Screening mammography is the only proven public health intervention for reducing mortality from breast cancer.

All screening has the potential to cause harm. The position statement describes the harms associated with breast screening, including over-diagnosis, false negative results and anxiety. These harms are not new or greater than previously considered by the BSA programme.

# Will the NSU release further position statements in future?

The NSU works with expert groups, on an ongoing basis, to make sure each screening programme is based on the latest evidence and meets high standards. It will continue to occasionally publish position statements, when required, to provide clarity on certain issues and help women and health professionals make informed decisions.

