

Embargoed until 0600 April 22, 2010

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Cancer Council warns women about unproven breast imaging

Cancer Council Western Australia today urged women not to rely on unproven technologies to detect breast cancer.

The Cancer Council is concerned about the proliferation of commercial breast imaging services, accompanied by aggressive marketing which promotes these services as 'safe' 'non-invasive' and 'comfortable'.

In response, the Cancer Council has invited an expert in breast cancer screening technologies being promoted in WA and their efficacy to advise on the current state of the science.

Professor Janet Hiller from the University of Adelaide and Director of Adelaide Health Technology Assessment, who co-authored an extensive review on new and emerging technologies for the Australian Government under the auspices of the ANZ Horizon Scanning Network in 2009 will speak to more than 140 General Practitioners on Thursday night on the issue.

Professor Hiller said the concern about the breast imaging technologies is that there is insufficient, evidence of their effectiveness and safety.

"The commercial technologies currently being offered in WA have not been shown to be effective in detecting breast cancer in women who do not have symptoms," Professor Hiller said.

"Until evidence becomes available, women should use proven strategies for the detection of breast cancer, such as mammogram."

The breast imaging techniques known to be in current use Perth clinics include;

- Electrical impedance which detects, records and maps differences in the electrical conductivity of cancerous and surrounding normal tissue.
- Digital Infrared Thermal Imaging/Thermography which uses infrared imaging to detect changes in skin temperature. Tumours are areas of high cell growth and metabolism, which may generate more heat.
- Thermal Radiometry (or microwave radiometry) measures the temperature of surface and internal breast tissue. Like infrared thermography, it operates on the principle that "hotter" areas may indicate areas of possible risk.

Cancer Council President, Professor Christobel Saunders, a leading breast cancer surgeon and researcher, warned women considering paying for examinations using these technologies.

"The only proven and reliable screening method is mammogram and women should be wary of claims that other technologies can detect breast cancer," she said.

"We are concerned that these clinics are targeting younger women and those with dense breast tissue or breast implants.

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“Some of the claims being made are very worrying, especially if a woman relies on one of these unproven technologies and later develops breast cancer which is found too late for successful treatment,” Professor Saunders said.

“While we acknowledge that mammography is not perfect, it is the most reliable and effective early detection method that we have for breast cancer.”

While the devices used may have approval from the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and are entered on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG), TGA approval only ensures that these technologies are safe in terms of an absence of immediate harm.

“TGA approval does not imply that these technologies are proven as effective for early identification of breast cancer on women with no symptoms or that the risk of other undesirable outcomes, such as risk of missed cancer and false reassurance from false positive test results or unnecessary investigations from false positive tests, is low,” Professor Hiller said.

Professor Saunders said women considering commercial forms of imaging or breast checks should be made fully aware of the extent of their effectiveness or potential harms.

“We are calling on the State government to regulate these clinics and ensure that they can only make claims according to peer-reviewed scientific research rather than the claims of the manufacturers of the various equipment,” Professor Saunders said.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women in WA. In 2007, 1119 women were diagnosed with breast cancer in WA and 256 died from the disease.

Women with questions about breast cancer can call the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20.

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