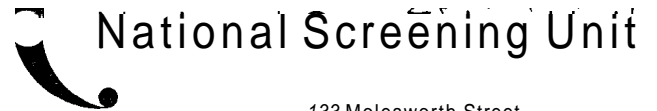


14 SEP 2009

10 September 2009



Ms Ann Martin
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A SEPARATE UNIT OF
THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Dear Ann,

Re: Breast screening for women over 70

Elizabeth Knopf has asked me to respond to your letter of 21 August 2009 asking why the eligible age range for BreastScreen Aotearoa (BSA), New Zealand's free breast screening programme, has an upper limit of 69 years. I appreciate your concern about this important topic.

The majority of breast screening programmes around the world have an eligible age range of 50 to 69 years. Mammographic screening has been shown to be most effective in reducing deaths from breast cancer in women in this age range.

You are quite correct that the incidence of breast cancer increases with age, but at present there is no consistent high-quality scientific evidence about the overall benefits of screening women over 70 years.

The potential benefits of early breast cancer detection may be offset in women who have other diseases which diminish life expectancy, in those who would not tolerate evaluation or treatment, and in those with impaired quality of life. In addition, no data from randomized, controlled trials provide information about the morbidity associated with screening, follow-up, and treatment among older women. Finally, a major concern in elderly women is the diagnosis and treatment of duct carcinoma in situ (DCIS), since mortality rates from DCIS are very low and yet DCIS is treated surgically.

For these reasons, an individual approach is currently recommended for further screening in women over 70. This is not catered for by the blanket approach for population-based screening in BSA. Whether screening is potentially of overall benefit for an individual woman depends on the particular harms and benefits for her. Older women are best to discuss this with their GP.

However, BreastScreen Aotearoa continues to monitor scientific trials and programmes overseas, and as new evidence becomes available it may be that the age range could be extended.

However, BreastScreen Aotearoa continues to monitor scientific trials and programmes overseas, and as new evidence becomes available it may be that the age range could be extended.

New Zealand women of any age who have a breast symptom are eligible for a publicly funded diagnostic mammogram at their public hospital following a referral from their GP. Publicly funded mammograms are also available to women not otherwise eligible for BreastScreen Aotearoa if they are at higher risk because of previous breast cancer, a mother or sister who developed breast cancer before menopause or developed cancer in both breasts, or if they have had a previous biopsy of breast tissue showing an at-risk lesion.

It is important for all women to remember that if they have any concerns about their breasts, they should see their GP.

Thank you for writing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jacqui Akuhata-Brown'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'J' and 'A'.

Jacqui Akuhata-Brown
Group Manager
National Screening Unit