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## Don't be fooled: Mammograms save lives

Helen H. Wiest • GUEST COLUMNIST • October 29, 2010

In 2009, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force created a tidal wave of turmoil by opposing routine mammogram screening for women in their 40s.

Those of us in the breast cancer medical community know that the "facts" from the Canadian study used to draw this conclusion were deeply flawed. For example, the study was biased from the outset because women with known advanced breast cancer were selectively put into the screening mammography group.

Also, the quality of the mammograms was very poor, so much so that U.S. physicians felt the need to publicly rebuke the Canadian researchers.

Unfortunately, no one on the task force was from the American breast cancer community: not a single radiologist, oncologist, breast surgeon or any other clinician. It did include representatives of major health insurers.

Few in the American breast cancer community take the data from the Canadian study seriously. Nevertheless, according to a survey by the Avon Foundation for Women, nationwide access to mammography has decreased since the task force issued its new guidelines. More than a dozen states have changed their breast cancer screening programs to reflect the task force's recommendations.

There is no disagreement about the fact that mammography saves lives. Since 1990 and the onset of regular mammographic screening in the U. S., the death rate from breast cancer has decreased by 30 percent.

In the year before the task force report, Asheville Breast Center screened 7,700 women in their 40s. In the year since the report, we have screened 7,000. Our total number of screening mammograms (all ages) in that time period has decreased from around 35,000 to 33,000.

There's no way to know if the task force recommendations have had an impact, but it seems more than coincidental that this is the first time

since 1990 that our numbers have decreased.

Women need to understand that mammography is not perfect. We are humans and don't see every cancer that is on a mammogram. But we see a lot of them. Last year at Asheville Breast Center alone, we found more than 400 breast cancers with mammography. On average, we have found one breast cancer a week in a woman in her 40s. In the future, if the task force's recommendations become widespread, we will find fewer.

Now, instead of being found while very small with mammography, some women will wait until their cancers are large enough to feel.

But there is hope. In July of this year, the Department of Health and Human Services issued guidelines recommending annual screening mammography for women in their 40s. In the new regulations, HHS labeled the latest task force guidelines as "not considered to be current."

Mammography saves lives. Know the facts and discuss these studies and guidelines with your primary care physician.

This is the opinion of Dr. Helen Wiest, who joined Asheville Radiology in 1990. She graduated from Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, and trained at Duke University Medical Center. She is a member of the WNC/Buncombe County Medical Society.

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Breast Disease and the American College of Radiology have just started a campaign to clear up the confusion on when and how often women should receive mammograms. Visit [www.mammographysaveslives.org](http://www.mammographysaveslives.org) to review scientific information regarding why screening needs to start at 40. Annual mammography screening for women in their 40s and older is supported by the American Cancer Society, American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, National Comprehensive Cancer Network, American College of Surgeons, American Society of Breast Disease, American College of Radiology, and Society of Breast Imaging.

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