Breast cancer screening: honest information please

The French Public Health Code states (our translation) that “everyone has the right to information concerning their health” and that “this information includes the various diagnostic tests, treatments or preventive care interventions that may be recommended”. Information should also be provided concerning “their usefulness, their potential urgency, their consequences, and the most frequent or severe risks (...)” (1).

French health agencies evade the issue. Following publication of a review article on mammography screening in our French edition la revue Prescrire in 2006, the French National Cancer Institute and the French Institute for Public Health Surveillance published a joint document that acknowledged the potential adverse effects of screening and examined the issue of over-diagnosis (2). However, they selected only the most optimistic data — those showing a reduction of about 35% in breast cancer mortality among women aged from 50 to 69 years — without attempting to explain why so many studies have failed to confirm these findings.

This also applies to brochures distributed by French cancer treatment centres, the League against Cancer (Ligue contre le Cancer), the Ministry of Health, the national health insurance system, and some non profit organisations that coordinate breast cancer screening (3-8). There have been claims of “3000 lives saved”, but this number does not correspond to overall mortality (6-8).

Negative aspects ignored. Most of the brochures distributed by these institutions fail to mention any of the risks associated with mammography screening, such as false-positive and false-negative results, unnecessary surgery, and over-diagnosis.

In fact, many of these brochures resemble advertisements rather than reliable information leaflets.

In July 2007, the breast cancer screening information website created by the French government still failed to mention the unknowns and potential risks associated with mammography screening (a).

The French National Authority for Health states that the information given to patients is intended to “increase their knowl-