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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-

edge (...), in order (...) to help them to decide whether or not to participate in screening, to accept or refuse a diagnostic test, treatment or care procedure, and to choose between several options if relevant” (9).

Institutional apathy. The French government seems more concerned with justifying past decisions than with providing information to the public.

Other concerned parties have stepped in to discuss the quality of information that the public receives concerning mammography screening (10). While waiting for the authorities to get their act together, it is up to individual healthcare professionals to ensure that women receive balanced and honest information on the advantages as well as the unknowns and potential risks of mammography screening for breast cancer.

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a- The website on Organised Breast Cancer Screening (www.rendezvousanteplus.net) is sponsored by the Ministry of Health, the national health insurance system, and a French cancer organisation (la Ligue contre le cancer). It is part of a national campaign, based on posters, brochures, etc., designed to ensure that the public “knows all about breast cancer screening” (ref 6).

Selected references from Prescrire’s literature search.

- 1- Article L. 1111-2 du Code de la santé publique. www.legifrance.gouv.fr accessed 25 June 2007: 8 pages.
- 2- Institut national du cancer et Institut de veille sanitaire “Dépistage du cancer du sein: que peut-on dire aujourd’hui des bénéfices attendus ?” Septembre 2006: 9 pages.
- 3- Institut national du cancer “Sein (cancer): questions sur le dépistage” 25 May 2007: 3 pages.
- 4- Fédération nationale des centres de lutte contre le cancer “Le cancer du sein”. www.fnclcc.fr accessed 24 February 2007: 6 pages.
- 5- La ligue contre le cancer “Le cancer du sein” non daté: 20 pages. www.ligue-cancer.net accessed 24 February 2007.
- 6- “Le site du dépistage organisé du cancer du sein”. www.rendezvousanteplus.net accessed 1 July 2007: 14 pages.
- 7- Ministère de la santé et de la solidarité, Assurance maladie et Institut national du cancer “Dépistage organisé du cancer du sein. Plus de 3 millions de femmes y ont déjà participé. Et vous ?” brochure distributed by Association de Dépistage Gersois des Cancers in 2007: 4 pages.
- 8- L’Assurance maladie Midi-pyrénées “Le médecin traitant au cœur du dépistage du cancer du sein” *En direct médecins* 2007; (14): 2.
- 9- Haute autorité de santé “Élaboration d’un document écrit d’information à l’intention des patients et des usagers du système de santé” March 2005: 44 pages.
- 10- Les médecins coordinateurs des campagnes de dépistage en Ile-et-Vilaine “Courrier aux médecins d’Ile-et-Vilaine et aux médecins coordinateurs de l’association Acorde du 24 May 2006”: 3 pages.

