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Brinker Cites 'Justifiable Outrage' on Mammography Recommendations

By Jane Norman, CQ HealthBeat Associate Editor

A leading advocate in the battle against breast cancer criticized on Monday recommendations from a federal task force that women in their 40s drop routine mammograms, and said she's concerned that the "mass confusion and justifiable outrage" will result in fewer women seeking screenings vital to their health.

Nancy G. Brinker, the founder of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, said that the news of the recommendations and the controversy have "taken a tremendous toll" on the push to save women's lives. "I believe they have set us back," she said.

The report came as a "total surprise about the way it was announced" and "my personal feeling is, it was a little clumsy," said Brinker in a speech at the National Press Club.

"There are ways to convene and deliver these kinds of messages," she said, while emphasizing she was not making a "personal attack" on the task force. "It would have been helpful for them to convene a consensus of advocates — scientists, clinicians, people who treat cancer and deal with it every day. Again, public-health people who deal with the messaging. This alone would have comforted people."

Science is important, she said, "but so is communication." Susan G. Komen for the Cure has been deluged with calls and e-mail messages from outraged Americans during the past week, and some 25,000 to 30,000 people have signed up since the recommendations were issued, Brinker said.

"The rage that has been directed at [the task force] has been serious, and I'm glad I'm not a member of the panel, to be honest," she said.

Brinker also said that for "any insurance company that thinks this report could be used as a way to reduce coverage for mammography now or at some point in the future . . . we'll be watching."

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force said on Nov. 16 that healthy women in their 40s do not need routine breast cancer screening by mammogram because "the net benefit is small." The recommendation does not apply to women with a history of breast cancer in their families.

The independent task force, which is meant to be at arm's length from politics, is sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services.

The task force said that "the decision to start regular, biennial screening mammography before the age of 50 years should be an individual one and take patient context into account, including the patient's values regarding specific benefits and harms." For women between the ages of 50 and 74, screenings are needed every two years, the panel said.

A storm of criticism ensued, including from the American Cancer Society, and some people wondered if health care rationing or health insurer pressures were behind the statement. The task force announcement came at an awkward point for President Obama, who is trying to push his health care overhaul through Congress.

Two days after the recommendation was made, HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius made a strong statement distancing her agency.

“The U.S. Preventive Task Force is an outside independent panel of doctors and scientists who make recommendations. They do not set federal policy and they don’t determine what services are covered by the federal government,” Sebelius said. She has also made it clear that the task force members were not appointed by the Obama administration.

Asked about the timing of the announcement while health care is being fought over in Congress and cost is a major issue, Brinker said, “I choose not to be suspect about it.” She said that “we’ve spoken to [Sebelius] more than a few times, and I think this was a difficult issue for her to deal with.”

Susan G. Komen for the Cure was founded in 1982 and named for Brinker’s sister, who died of breast cancer. The organization helps fund breast cancer research and is planning a technology summit aimed at finding better screening tools for cancer.

There has been some progress. The five-year survival rate today for breast cancer that has not spread beyond the breast is 98 percent, compared with 74 percent in 1982. There are more than 2.5 million U.S. breast cancer survivors alive today. Yet one in every eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime, and more than 40,000 U.S. men and women die annually from the disease.

Brinker, who has also had breast cancer, said people should not change their behavior toward mammography. “What we want to encourage every single woman and man in America to do is continue what you’re doing, continue to be interactive and proactive with your health care professional,” read materials and learn as much as possible, Brinker said.

“Screening mammography saves lives,” she said.

Source: **CQ HealthBeat News**