

Lawmakers Criticize Task Force Over Mammogram Recommendations.

A congressional hearing on the US Preventive Services Task Force's (USPSTF) guidelines for mammograms drew a significant amount of media attention yesterday. ABC World News (12/2, story 6, 2:00, Gibson) reported, "The intense debate over breast cancer screenings shifted to Capitol Hill today. The medical experts who called for scaling back routine mammograms in a report issued two weeks ago were heavily criticized by lawmakers." The CBS Evening News (12/2, story 8, 2:15, Cordes) reported that the task force stuck "carefully to the script," and "insisted the frequency of false positives among younger women who get mammograms leads to unnecessary surgery."

CQ HealthBeat (12/3, Norman) reports that the USPSTF acknowledged "that the group's communication of its intentions was not the best." Testifying before the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on health, Task Force Chairman Ned Calonge said he "now realizes that the timing of the report was unfortunate, coming in the midst of a national fight over the future of healthcare." Calonge also assured that the decision was made prior to the healthcare overhaul debate, and insisted that "politics plays no part in our processes."

AFP (12/3) reports USPSTF vice-chairwoman Diana Petitti said the decision to begin routine examinations before the age of 50 "should be an individual one taken by a woman in consultation with her doctor." Petitti added that the organization simply wanted to convey that the exams at age 40 "should not be automatic."

The admission drew a harsh reaction from the congressional panel. On its website, CNN (12/3) reports Rep. John Shimkus (R-IL) said the decision exemplified "what we get when we have government intervention starting to dictate healthcare policy decisions." Rep. Roy Blunt (R-MO) said the guidelines only served to create "confusion for women and their families." On its website, ABC News (12/2, McKenzie, Parkinson) quoted Rep. John Shadegg (R-AZ), who warned the passage of the healthcare reform bill would make the recommendation "binding law," which "would be devastating to access to mammograms and nothing short of catastrophic for women's health in this country."

According to Bloomberg News (12/3, Gaouette), Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) "said in a prepared statement he had 'no doubt' the panel was 'driven by science and by the interpretation of science -- and not by cost or insurance coverage or the ongoing health-reform debate.'" Likewise, the Wall Street Journal (12/3, Mundy) reports that subcommittee chairman Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ) did not question the task force's motives. Reuters (12/3) also notes that the reactions were mostly split amongst party lines.

Radiologists Reject New Guidelines. At the Radiological Society of North America meeting, "critics said the guidelines represent a major setback to progress derived from increased breast cancer screening over the last decades," MedPage Today (12/2, Fiore) reported. Stephen A. Feig, MD, president-elect of the American Society of Breast Disease, said that "under the revised guidelines, 'screening will begin too late and its effects will be too little.'"

WebMD (12/2, Laino) reported that "Feig also took issue with USPSTF's reasoning that for younger women, annual mammograms carry a risk of harm, chiefly anxiety and false positives, that could outweigh their benefits." He added that "you're going to have some false positives, if you detect cancer early."

AuntMinnie.com (12/2, Yee) reported that Feig argued that "science that confirms

screening mammography's worth," citing "substantial data" that support "the benefit of screening for women in their 40s with solid percentages of breast cancer mortality reduction." And, although "there's consensus that breast cancers have variable growth rates," he noted that to "catch the fast growing cancers, which are often found in younger women, screening needs to happen every year."

Low-Dose Radiation May Increase Breast Cancer Risk By 50 Percent In High-Risk Women. The Washington Post (12/2, Stein) "The Checkup" blog reported that Dutch researchers reported "the results of an analysis...to determine whether low-dose radiation exposure affects the breast cancer risk among high-risk women" at the Radiological Society of North America meeting. They found that in "high-risk women, low-dose radiation exposure increased the risk of breast cancer by about 50 percent." The risk of breast cancer "was especially high among the youngest women -- those who were exposed before age 20 had more than double the risk." The team noted that "the results provide more evidence that women should discuss the decision about when and how often to get mammograms with their doctors."