

IGNORING THE FUNDAMENTALS - WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO PEER REVIEW?

There is, clearly, a major problem with the peer review with regard to screening mammography. Scientifically, unsupportable analyses continue to be published despite major methodological errors ([i][i],[ii][ii],[iii][iii],[iv][iv],[v][v]). The recent article in the British Medical Journal by Jorgensen et al ([vi][vi]) is another example of the failure of peer review that permitted the publication of a, methodologically, unsupportable analysis. The authors sought to compare the death rate from breast cancer in a population of women who had been offered mammography screening, to a different population of women who had not been offered screening. As the authors, correctly, point out such studies are no substitute for randomized, controlled trials (which have shown mortality reductions of as high as 44%), but they are the only way to determine what actually happens when screening is introduced into the general population.

There are numerous problems with this latest analysis. The age of the women offered screening was, apparently, 50-69, yet the authors used National statistics that grouped ages 35-54 and 55-74. This dilutes any benefit by including women who were not offered screening. They also dismiss the problem of women who were not, officially offered screening, but who had mammograms on their own outside the National program (and had their lives saved as a result). They do not provide any convincing evidence that this did not dilute their analysis.

The most important error was the fact that they simply looked at death rates without realizing that many of the women who died during the screening period were women who were diagnosed before screening was offered. The only way to get a clear understanding of the death rate change that occurs with screening is to only include women whose cancers were diagnosed during the period of screening and look at the death rate among these women. This is pretty straight forward and fundamental, yet dismissed by the authors, and clearly ignored at peer review. This article is simply the latest in the vast amount of misinformation that has been added to the literature with regard to mammography screening.

The randomized, controlled trials have shown an indisputable decrease in breast cancer deaths from mammography screening, and this is seen in general populations when screening is introduced and the data are analyzed appropriately. The continued publication of these pseudoscientific distractions from scientific analysis is a clear failure of the peer review system.