

The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

# More Questions About Mammograms

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Two years ago, a group of outside experts who advise the federal government raised a furor when it suggested that mammography screening to detect breast cancer early, when it is theoretically most treatable, should be scaled back. Now a new analysis published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, a journal of the American Medical Association, has found that while some women have their lives saved by mammograms, a vast majority found to have tumors do not benefit — probably because they have slow-growing cancers that would never have killed them or could have been treated at a later stage, or they have aggressive cancers that are deadly even if detected early.

The analysis, by two researchers at Dartmouth, used a variety of data sources to estimate the probability that a woman with breast cancer detected by mammography would have her life saved because of the screening. For the baseline case of a 50-year-old woman, only 3 percent to 13 percent escaped death from breast cancer thanks to early detection by mammography. As described by Tara Parker-Pope in *Science Times*, that translates into 4,000 to 18,000 women being helped by the test, a small portion of the 230,000 women diagnosed with invasive breast cancer annually in the U.S. and a minuscule fraction of the 39 million American women who undergo mammograms each year.

Several thousand lives saved per year is not inconsequential. But the new analysis inevitably raises questions as to whether the \$5 billion spent annually on mammography screening and the millions more spent urging women to get screened might better be used for other purposes. Women will face a difficult choice. Fewer

than 1 in 1,000 healthy women screened over a decade will have a cancer found at just the right moment for successful treatment. The rest will undergo a decade's worth of radiation for no medical benefit or, worse yet, undergo unnecessary treatments that can be harmful to eliminate tumors that would never have killed them.

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