

# Breast cancer studies used solid science

Last week's new United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) mammography screening recommendations brought to mind Robert Frost, "Nothing in life is constant but change."

The recommendations have caused an amazing amount of confusion, anger and wild distortion of the facts.

The facts are these: "The USPSTF recommends against routine screening mammography in women aged 40 to 49 years. The decision to start regular, biennial screening mammography before the age of 50 years should be an individual one and take into account patient context, including the patient's values regarding specific benefits and harms. The USPSTF recommends biennial screening mammography for women between the ages of 50 and 74 years."

As a nation, we invest nearly \$100 billion — yes, billion — in biomedical research each year. Our yield is new knowledge that helps make patient care better and safer. This means patient care recommendations constantly change. And they should.

The updated recommendations reviewed all existing studies and incorporated new findings from large U.K., Swedish and U.S. studies. Six independent teams of scientists funded by the National Cancer Institute conducted the analyses.

Screening tests, those done on healthy people without any symptoms, must be held to a very high standard based on the best, most current science. The number of people who are harmed — and all tests can cause harm — must be balanced against the number of people who will benefit. In this case, the science says that less is more.

What I told my patients is that mammograms are more likely to miss abnormalities in younger women because breasts are denser and breast cancer is less common in younger women. Taking both into account, the benefit of mammography before age 50 sits on the fence. Women need to make this decision for themselves. That's what the new recommendation says.

The USPSTF has the thankless work of sorting out the science on behalf of the American public. It has been doing a laudable job since 1984. As science changes, patient care recommendations change and they should.

Quality Quest for Health of Illinois is committed to evidence-based care standards. We offer a free Preventive Care Calculator on our website — [www.QualityQuest.org](http://www.QualityQuest.org) — that customizes recommendations to an individual based on age and gender.



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