

12 April 2011

Women warned about false thyroid cancer claims

Queensland Health has moved to reassure women that an email campaign linking mammograms to thyroid cancer is completely misleading and is not supported by scientific evidence.

Queensland Health Chief Health Officer Dr Jeannette Young said she was very concerned that women could be deterred from having their regular breast screen.

“We have had some of our BreastScreen Queensland Services report that women have cancelled appointments,” Dr Young said.

“Not having this life-saving check based on this erroneous email campaign is very serious.”

Dr Young said that this misleading information originated in the US and had spread to Australia, being widely circulated to women through social media.

The campaign suggests there is an increased risk of thyroid cancer from having a mammogram, and advises women to ask for a thyroid guard when they have a mammogram.

“This is just scaremongering,” said Dr Young.

“The radiation dose to the thyroid from a mammogram is extremely low, and there is no direct exposure of the thyroid to radiation as the beam is narrowly focused on the breast tissue.”

Data obtained from Queensland medical physicists states that the thyroid receives only a tiny radiation dose (typically about 0.08 milligray) during a breast screen examination, far less than the radiation dose to the thyroid per year from natural background radiation.

“The use of thyroid shields is also likely to interfere with the optimal positioning of the breast, which will reduce the quality of the breast screen image,” said Dr Young.

“Therefore the use of a thyroid shield during mammography is not recommended.”

Dr Young said it was reasonable for people to want to limit their radiation exposure, but in this case their concerns were misdirected and had the potential to be harmful.

“The risk of getting thyroid cancer from a breast X-ray is extremely low,” she said.

“The radiation dose from a mammogram is very small and poses little risk.

"The last thing we want to do is to scare women out of having their regular breastscan that could save their lives.

"I strongly urge Queensland women, particularly women aged 50-69 years, to continue to have their necessary, and potentially life-saving two yearly breastscan, and ignore this misleading information."

A free breastscan is also available for women aged 40-49 years and over 70. For more information about BreastScreen Queensland Services, visit www.health.qld.gov.au/breastscan or to book an appointment phone 132050

For more information about the false links between mammograms and thyroid cancer, Queensland women are urged to review a factsheet from the American Thyroid Association (see www.thyroid.org/patients/brochures/ThyroidCancer_brochure.pdf)

ends