THE NSW PROGRAM FOR MAMMOGRAPHIC SCREENING

In NSW mammographic screening for the early detection of breast cancer is being phased in as a population-based program over a five-year period. The goal of the program is to reduce breast cancer deaths by 30 per cent in the target population which is all asymptomatic women aged 50-69 years. Swedish and other overseas trials have demonstrated an unequivocal benefit in reduced mortality in women in this age group. Women aged 40-49 years and 70-79 years who present for screening will be accepted in accordance with national policy, but active recruitment will be restricted to the 50-69 age group.

A previous article stressed the importance of proceeding carefully through a pilot project stage because of the known pitfalls in mammographic screening: principally the need to recruit at least 70 per cent of the target population to regular screening; the need for adequately trained radiologists, radiographers and other service providers and the application of uniform standards and quality assurance measures.

In June 1991 the NSW Health Department agreed to participate in the National Program for the Early Detection of Breast Cancer. In June 1992, following approval of the five-year strategic plan for the NSW program, the Commonwealth and State signed a three-year performance and funding agreement for the first phase of the program. Commonwealth funds of $13.5 million are being matched by the State for the financial years 1991-92, 1992-93 and 1993-94 to screen a cumulative total of 179,703 women.

The NSW Health Department has assigned responsibility for the implementation of the program to the NSW Cancer Council, and the State Planning and Co-ordination Unit has been set up under the auspices of the council for this purpose.

The Statewide program is being expanded in accordance with the strategic plan which was produced by the State Planning and Co-ordination Unit with the assistance of the Advisory Committee of the NSW Program for Mammographic Screening. The unit is working closely with the Chief Executive Officers of the Area Health Services and Directors of Health Regions for the Statewide development of the program.

The service delivery model for mammographic screening comprises a multidisciplinary assessment centre with a number of linked screening units. This entity, known as a screening and assessment service, has a defined geographic catchment area not confined to Health Area or Region boundaries. The available resources will be used to maximise the effectiveness of the program across the State.

The State Planning and Co-ordination Unit has been established to assist the States in forming the site inspection teams. The two existing services in the Central Sydney and Hunter Area Health Services have applied for accreditation and their site inspections were conducted in October 1992. The recommendations of the Accreditation Sub-Committee and the State Planning and Co-ordination Unit about these services were ratified by the National Accreditation Committee at its meeting in December. New services are required to undergo site inspections within two months of commencement of operation.

A State Mammographic Screening Register is being set up within the State Planning and Co-ordination Unit. The register will monitor crucial indicators of an effective program such as the participation rate of the target population, the outcomes of the work-up procedures on recalled women. The screening and assessment services will be required to transmit data on each woman screened to the register in accordance with the National Minimum Data Set. Summary data will be transferred to the National Screening Register.

The State Planning and Co-ordination Unit has been developing a strategy to address the task of training for all clinical and non-clinical staff involved in the screening and assessment services.

To achieve the agreed screening targets, individual and general recruitment strategies will be used to encourage women aged 50-69 years to come forward for screening. Individual strategies include personalised letters of invitation using the electoral roll. General strategies are those which operate at population or community level and include the use of media and community action.

A recruitment package will be made available to the screening and assessment services to assist recruitment plans for their respective catchment areas. The package comprises three major documents: a summary of recruitment research in the Australian and overseas settings, a set of consumer-oriented standards and a case study of the implementation of recruitment strategies.

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Blue green algae

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The most promising avenue for future epidemiological research would be school-based studies. Children living along the Darling swim frequently in the river. School nurses are in a unique position to monitor even minor illness among these children. The most appropriate option for future surveillance of this potential public health problem would be to monitor continuously trends in blue green algae-related illnesses reported to school nurses in areas regularly affected by riverine blooms of blue green algae. Increases in the incidence of blue green algae-associated illnesses during or following algal blooms would indicate the need for further epidemiological study.

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The satisfaction of women with the service provided at the time of the first screen will be an important influence on their decision to have future screens. A survey of women attending the screening and assessment services in the Central and Hunter Area Health Services was begun in June 1992. The results of the survey will be taken into account in the planning of the new services to ensure that service provision meets the perceived needs of women.

Printed materials about mammographic screening have been written in consultation with consumer representatives, health providers and educators and will be distributed by the services.

Community education is a major issue in developing public knowledge and acceptance of the mammographic screening program and fostering recruitment of the target population. Strategies to involve health promotion personnel in the broadest sense will be developed through a series of seminars about breast cancer and mammographic screening. The seminars will be developed on a consultative basis by the State Planning and Co-ordination Unit.

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