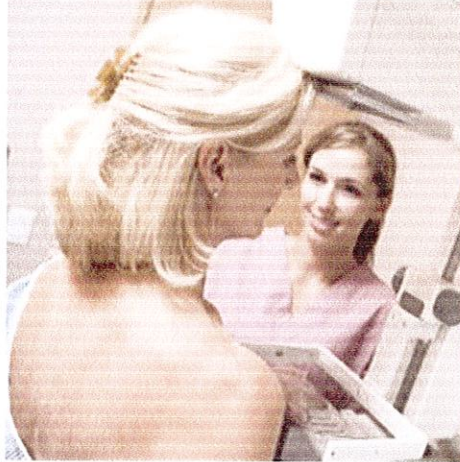


## How Important Is That Mammogram?



By Laurie Wertich

As if the controversy surrounding mammography screening for breast cancer isn't charged enough already, new research shows that, contrary to popular belief, annual mammograms may not save as many lives as once thought—and may even lead to substantial overdiagnosis of breast cancer. In fact, the researchers concluded that breast cancer was overdiagnosed in 1.3 million women over the past 30 years. The results of the study were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

### Understanding Screening Mammography

A mammogram is an X-ray of the breast. Screening mammography is performed in a woman without breast symptoms to detect breast cancer at an early stage, when it is most easily treated. Different groups of experts have reached different conclusions about when mammographic screening should begin and how often it should be performed. The US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends that routine screening of average-risk women begin at age 50 and be performed every two years. A number of other groups, including the American Cancer Society, the American College of Radiology, the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the American Medical Association, recommend annual screening beginning at age 40.

Currently, mammography is the most reliable tool for screening the general population for breast cancer; however, the screening tool does have limitations—which can include false-positive test results (a suggestion that cancer may be present when it is not), false-negative results (missed cancers), and overdiagnosis (resulting in unnecessary treatment). Put simply, overdiagnosis is the diagnosis of something that would not have resulted in clinical symptoms in a person's lifetime.

### The Controversy

## Mammograms: The Fatal Flaw

Many of us have are hard pressed with the present gold standard of breast cancer...the mammogram. But one woman had a problem and addressed it head on. Nancy Cappello was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer after eleven yearly mammograms that routinely sent her "happy gram" notifications as she calls them.

"How is that possible? she asked. "You have dense breasts," was the reply from her doctors, looking at her like she should know what that meant. "What are dense breasts? You've never told me I have dense breasts!"



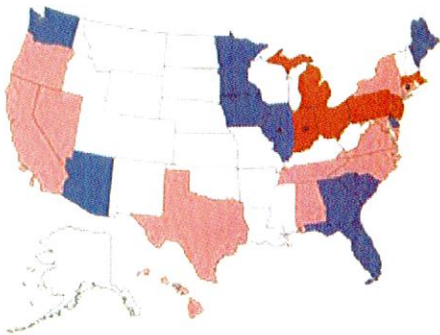
Now women in twelve states will know their breast density because of Nancy's efforts. After four years of working through the legislative process, between her chemo, radiation and surgeries, Breast Density Notification Laws have been enacted. The doctors and radiologists in these states must tell women what their breast density means to them. Nancy calls this the "fatal flaw" in mammography.

I think it should be called "The Tell the Truth Law." Women will be told that if they have dense breasts, a mammogram will miss half of their cancers. It seems that with your first mammogram, doctors know your breast density-it is recorded on their mammogram report, they just don't tell you.

The false security created by this non-disclosure has been a life and death situation for many women. The AMA says, "Withholding medical information from patients without their knowledge or consent is ethically unacceptable." [1]

### Facts Every Women Should Know About their Breast Density [2]

- 40% of women have dense breast tissue.
- Breast density is one of the strongest predictors of the failure of mammography to detect cancer.
- Mammography misses every other cancer in dense breasts.
- Breast density is a well-established predictor of breast cancer risk.
  - Breast density is a greater risk factor than having two first degree relatives with breast cancer



KEY:  
PINK: Enacted Law  
RED: Introduced Bill  
BLUE: Working on Bill  
WHITE: No Action  
BLACK : Insurance Coverage Law