Politicians: Leave breast density discussion to doctors and their patients

By ACSH Staff — October 26, 2012

As many as 40 percent of women have dense breasts, which increases significantly their risk of getting breast cancer. Because of the way dense breast tissue appears because on a mammogram, it can also obscure tumors, making increasing the likelihood doctors will miss a dangerous lesion. Now a number of states Connecticut, Texas, Virginia, California and New York have passed laws requiring doctors to inform women of their tissue density, the New York Times reports [1].

But some doctors are wary of the laws, saying breast density is a subjective issue and a mandatory disclosure may needlessly scare women and propel them into getting additional tests, which usually finds insignificant lesions more often than actual cancers. They also argue that doctor-patient relationships shouldn't be legislated.

I'm always worried when politicians start legislating the medical conversation, especially when it's a medical conversation where the experts don't know what needs to be said, Dr. Otis Brawley, the chief medical officer and executive vice president of the American Cancer Society and a professor of medicine at Emory University in Atlanta, told the Times. He does agree, however, that women with dense breasts should be so informed.

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross says doctors should tell women about their dense breasts, but agrees this is one area where the politicians should keep their hands off. There's a difference between having doctors educated on this subject and having a law mandating it, he says. Comparing the issue to prostate cancer screening, he adds, You're going to have a lot of needless interventions including surgery however there will undoubtedly be some women whose cancer will be detected early enough to make a difference.


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