

Breast cancer screening in the digital age

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The key to effectively detecting early breast cancer is being able to find something smaller than a pen point -- like locating a needle in a haystack.

By the end of 2008, women in Dufferin-Caledon will have a high-tech defence in the fight against breast cancer. Headwaters Health Care Foundation is currently raising funds to buy a digital mammography machine for the hospital at a cost of \$600,000.

"It's shocking to most people to learn the government doesn't provide funding to our hospital for any equipment purchases. Because of this, we rely on the generosity of people in our community to raise the funds we need to purchase all our hospital equipment. From wheelchairs and bedside monitors, to sophisticated diagnostic equipment and delicate surgical tools -- the community has provided the means for us to acquire it all," says Headwaters president and CEO, Bob Baynham.

Digital mammography is one of the most significant recent diagnostic breakthroughs in women's health. It is also an important piece of equipment that Headwaters Health Care Centre needs to build a comprehensive women's health service, which currently includes bone mineral density testing and ultrasound. With the introduction of digital mammography, women will be able to receive a full range of services in a single location.

Digital technology has several advantages for the patient. Digital mammograms take as little as half the time of traditional exams, use a lower dose of radiation, and patients may experience less pressure on the breast. Increased image clarity decreases the likelihood a woman will be called back for another exam, which reduces anxiety.

To understand the additional sophistication that comes with digital mammography, think about your digital camera. The photograph isn't much different from the one you take with your film camera. The difference is that you can play with the digital image to get the best possible photograph. So too can radiologists manipulate the digital image to get the best possible view of the patient's breast tissue. The image can also be easily emailed to another radiologist for a second opinion.

"During my seven month breast cancer journey, I learned about the importance of early detection. Having state-of-the-art digital mammography available at Headwaters will help diagnose cancer early so we can be a community of breast cancer survivors," says Denice Oliver of Grand Valley.

According to Cancer Care Ontario, breast cancer is the most common type of cancer for women in Ontario. Digital mammography is significantly better than traditional film mammography in screening women under the age of 50 with a family history of breast cancer, or women of any age who have very dense breasts. It's important to remember that a mammogram can detect a lump when it is still very small -- up to several years before there are any signs or symptoms.

While the exact causes of breast cancer are still unknown, regular breast screenings are the best way to detect cancer at its earliest stage and begin treatment to fight the disease.

Digital mammography will help women in our community find that needle in a haystack.

To make a donation toward the purchase of a digital mammography machine, contact Headwaters Health Care Foundation at 519-941-2702, ext. 2303 or visit www.headwaters-health.ca.

Your Health Matters is a column dealing with health and healthy lifestyles in this community, which is submitted by various health-related organizations.