Breast screening through mammography has shown to be efficacious in preventing breast cancer deaths amongst women aged 50-69. Mammography has been available in Alberta for well over a decade, and in 1990, an organized breast cancer screening program was inaugurated. As part of the baseline information which would help direct the activities of such a program, a knowledge, attitude and behaviour survey was carried out in early 1991. Results of this survey have been published,(1,2) and showed several key findings which helped direct the program's activities and educational initiatives over the ensuing years. First, the survey showed that women aged 60-69, although in the age group which would benefit from screening mammography, were less likely to be regular screeners than women in their 40's.(1) Thus, the program began specific initiatives to inform women in the target age group about the potential benefits of mammography. Second, the original survey included women in Calgary and Edmonton, as well as a sample of women who lived one to three hours out of the urban centres. Women outside of the major urban centres were only half as likely to have had regular screening mammography, even after adjusting for a number of sociodemographic factors.(2) Following these results, the program launched a mobile screening initiative to meet the needs of women outside of major urban centres.

In late 1995, the knowledge, attitude and behaviour study was repeated. The repeat survey attempted to sample women from each Regional Health Authority within Alberta, with a final sample size of over 1600 women. While results are still preliminary, they offer some encouragement in the improvement of screening behaviours in the years between the surveys.

Perhaps the most relevant marker we should be using to monitor behaviour is the proportion of women who are classified as probable screeners. For the purposes of our surveys, we defined this as women who had had a mammogram within the prior two years, who stated it was for the purposes of a check up and not for specific health problems, and who also intended to have another one in the next two years. In 1991, approximately 27 percent of women aged 50-59 and 17 percent of women aged 60-69 were probable screeners. In our 1995 survey, the proportion who reported themselves as probable screeners was slightly over 50 percent, and was scarcely different between the two age groups. Thus, while a striking improvement has been shown, there is still room to improve the screening rates.

As would be expected, there were still some differences across the regions. Calgary and Edmonton screening rates were not appreciably higher than the provincial average; because of the size of the populations in these areas, however one would expect that the rates in Calgary and Edmonton would predict the provincial average fairly closely. In regions where there were no mobile activity and limited access to fixed sites, screening rates were much lower. Fewer than half of women aged 50-59, and fewer than 30 percent of women aged 60-69, were probable screeners in these areas. However one very encouraging finding was the high screening rate in the regions where the mobile had saturated the area over the prior few years. In these regions, nearly two thirds of women were probable screeners.

The current target for the screening program in Alberta is to reach 80 percent of all women in the target age group, and no fewer than 70 percent of any identifiable sub-group. Thus, efforts must be made to improve screening rates, despite the encouraging findings. The Screen Test program has added two additional mobiles, which are targeting several of the regions that showed low probable screener rates in this survey. In addition, the ongoing efforts to create a province-wide screening program will be critical to ensuring that women in the target age group are aware of the potential benefits of screening mammography, and are able to access high quality screening mammography easily. We would hope to have more complete data on screening rates throughout the province, and to repeat the survey to gain more information on knowledge and attitudes in future years.

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References