

## SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

[http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/243530\\_hcenter06.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/243530_hcenter06.html)

### Breast centers go digital

#### New technology improves mammography images of some patients

Thursday, October 6, 2005

By **JULIE DAVIDOW**

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Dr. Robert Fulton spends most of his day in a dark room studying shades of gray and white on mammograms taken a few steps away at The Polyclinic in Seattle.

Since last October, he has had a new tool to help him find breast cancers: digital imaging.

The Polyclinic is one of the few mammography centers in Seattle that has digital machines. The company switched over from film to digital in 2004. (Digital equipment is also available at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, the University of Washington, Virginia Mason Medical Center and Swedish Medical Center.)

A new study, published online Sept. 16 in the New England Journal of Medicine, found that digital is more effective than traditional film mammograms for spotting tumors in young women and women with dense breast tissue.

The study doesn't address whether digital saves lives.

But with screening mammograms, digital "sort of levels the playing field" for younger women who have had lower rates of cancer detection in mammograms than women over 50, said Dr. Constance Lehman, a radiologist and head of breast imaging at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.

In 2000, the Food and Drug Administration approved digital units for screening mammograms, or tests done before cancer is suspected.

Group Health Cooperative and the Seattle Breast Center at Northwest Hospital say they are planning to go digital within the next couple of years, in large part because of the new study.



 zoom

Joshua Trujillo / P-I

Dr. Robert Fulton examines film of breast X-rays at The Polyclinic. The Polyclinic and other mammography centers now use digital X-rays, which give them better imaging for some patients. A new study finds that digital is more effective for spotting tumors in young women and women with dense breast tissue.

Cost -- digital machines are up to four times as expensive as film -- and a lack of evidence have led many centers to hold off on digital.

"Until this trial ... there really wasn't any data that digital mammography showed an advantage," said Dr. Craig Hanson, medical director of the Seattle Breast Center at Northwest.

"It's been on our radar screen for the last three years," said Jo-Ellen Callahan, radiology manager for the breast centers at Group Health Cooperative. "I'm hoping this (study) is giving me a little bit more oomph to speed things up."

In the meantime, some experts worry that women may delay mammograms until they can book an appointment at a center with digital equipment.

"It's much more important that women get a mammogram than wait to get a digital mammogram," Lehman said.

Only 8 percent of mammography centers nationwide have digital units. The cost of a mammogram varies by region and insurance, but Medicare reimburses \$85.65 for film exams and \$135.29 for digital, according to the National Cancer Institute.

About 24 million screening mammograms are performed each year in the United States.

"Now we have this very strong data supporting higher accuracy, but we don't have enough units," Lehman said. "Patient advocacy groups are already working hard to figure out how they're going to encourage hospitals to purchase this equipment."

The American Cancer Society recommends that women start having annual mammograms at 40. And doctors often recommend a first mammogram at 35 for women with a history of breast cancer in their families.

At The Polyclinic, Fulton reads the digital images on two computer monitors, comparing them with the women's film X-rays taken in previous years.

The new digital technology allows Fulton to zoom in on a suspicious area, change the contrast and sharpen the focus, giving him more options for manipulating the image.

The dark areas are fat; the white is breast tissue. But tumors are also white.

The breasts of younger women tend to be crowded with white tissue and relatively little fat, making it more difficult to spot cancers.

"Fat is a radiologist's friend," Fulton said. "If a tumor grows in a fatty breast, we're going to see that easily and early."

Mammography centers in Seattle say they have received calls from women asking for digital.

At Swedish Medical Center, patients have opted to cancel their appointments at the Ballard campus (where only film is available) in favor of downtown facilities that have a mix of digital and film, said Karen McInerney, director of the Swedish Breast Cancer Center.

"I'd probably be the same way," McInerney said. "You want the best for yourself."

Other patients are assessed when they walk in and sent to either digital or film depending on their age and breast density.

Even though Karen Devine, 56, falls outside the optimal age range for digital, she noticed another benefit of the technology. Unlike film, which has to be developed, technicians know immediately if a digital image is sharp and taken from the right angle.

"I was in and out a lot quicker than I have ever been," Devine said after a recent mammogram at The Polyclinic on First Hill. "There wasn't the anxiety of having to wait to see if the picture was clear."

## **LEARN MORE**

For more information about the Digital Mammographic Imaging Screening Trial:

National Cancer Institute -- [www.nci.nih.gov/newscenter/pressreleases/DMISTQandA](http://www.nci.nih.gov/newscenter/pressreleases/DMISTQandA)

These Seattle centers offer digital mammography:

- Seattle Cancer Care Alliance -- 206-288-7800
- Swedish Medical Center:

Breast Cancer Care/First Hill -- 206-386-3776

Women's Diagnostic Imaging/First Hill -- 206-215-3939

Comprehensive Breast Center/Providence -- 206-320-4800

- The Polyclinic -- 206-329-1777
- Virginia Mason Medical Center -- 206-625-7250

---

*P-I reporter Julie Davidow can be reached at 206-448-8180 or [juliedavidow@seattlepi.com](mailto:juliedavidow@seattlepi.com).*

© 1998-2006 Seattle Post-Intelligencer