

Early diagnosis for breast cancer saves lives -- which should not be forgotten during the pandemic.

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from St Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Steven Clark.

Evidence shows that the earlier you detect breast cancer the better the prognosis. The National Comprehensive Cancer Network recommends that women of average risk should have an annual breast cancer screening beginning at age 40. Yet, during the height of the pandemic, many imaging centers were closed. Over the last year, it is estimated that the pandemic led to an 80 percent drop in routine screening appointments. As a result, according to the National Cancer Institute, there could be nearly 10,000 excess deaths in the United States over the next decade from breast and colorectal cancer because of covid-19 related delays.

With us today to discuss this is Dr. Bert Petersen, chief of breast surgery at SBH Health System. Welcome, Dr. Petersen.

So are you concerned that by missing their annual mammogram a woman puts herself at potentially greater risk of getting advanced breast cancer?

Oh absolutely because you know the fact that we have you coming in for annual screening is because things can happen in a 12-month period. I can tell you in my own personal experience taking care of women in the breast program here at St. Barnabas we had two cases during the pandemic where a woman had had a recent mammogram, the mammogram was negative but she developed a lump in a very short period of time after a negative mammogram. We're talking within three to four months, did nothing about it and by the time she sought care at the end of the summer the cancer was very advanced. You know so and both of them said "I was afraid to come in," so in this case it wasn't that our services weren't available. Our services were available, which I think you were talking earlier about the fact that many mammography services were not available. In our case the services were available but we also had to deal with our community being afraid to seek care during the pandemic which is also going to contribute to that increased number of deaths that the CDC and the NIH is referring to.

Are you still seeing that or are women still concerned about coming in at this point?

I think it's gotten less and less a concern, particularly with our new wellness center that's so inviting and it's you know they can see all the precautions that we've taken to make it safe and clean for the patients. We don't seem to be having an effect with people not showing up for their mammograms or ultrasounds as being you know when we when they're prescribed now. People are showing up for their appointments and in fact I'm seeing an increase in the number of people who are coming in for their follow-up appointments or asking to come in you know because I started doing more televideo visits but now patients are asking to come in so that that that fear seems to be going away.

Well let's talk since you mentioned it, let's talk about this new women's imaging center at the health and wellness center. Why is it so inviting? Tell us a little bit about it.

Well, first of all just if you just look at the physical plant you know the colors, the furniture, design, the layout in and of itself is inviting right and it's in many ways one-stop shopping for a woman. You know you come in you can see your gynecologist, you can see the breast surgeon and at the same time there is women's imaging there, including mammography, ultrasound, we're able to do biopsies and there's bone density imaging also for women who are dealing with osteoporosis and osteopenia. So, it's all comprehensive. It's right there and you know I'll take this opportunity to say where the first institution in the Bronx to be able to deliver 3D imaging for mammography and also 3D biopsy so we're giving state-of-the-art care to women in a very safe and comfortable environment and we're very proud of what we're providing for our community.

In layman's terms what is the benefit of 3D mammography or 3D biopsy?

Well, as you know for many many years mammography was based on what we call 2D imaging. Basically, you would just get a flat picture of what you as best as you can in the breast with the 3D imaging in other words we're able to look at the breasts from many different angles and many different views. We can see through the density in the breast for women who have dense breasts. We can see through that better and pick up more problem areas that may require additional imaging or may require a biopsy,

Are studies showing that more is picked up with the 3D than with the 2D?

We saw in our first year after instituting 3D imaging we had a 200 percent increase in the number of positive lesions that we found in mammography so there is increased sensitivity and we're able to now pick up things much earlier.

And yet that's not the universal technology used throughout the Bronx, right?

In Manhattan it's probably almost universal but when you come to the areas particularly in the Bronx where you have a harder to reach population, a population who more often will be either uninsured, or should say more underinsured where these services you know are often difficult to pay for, you don't find these services and I think like I said I'm very proud that at SBH Health System we have been able to bring these services to a population, to our community that otherwise wouldn't have access to it and I think that's one of the big assets about the wellness center is that this is technology right here in the Bronx that you would otherwise have to go perhaps to Manhattan to receive it.

Right and again if you should have a positive finding in the mammogram you get biopsied right there right?

Yes you get biopsied right here. The breast surgery program is right there, if there's something that needs to be removed. We have all of the services to complement this, you know because I you know Steve I think you've heard me say this before I'm not the biggest fan of quote unquote screening programs on their own, right? A screening program must be affiliated with a robust treatment team, a robust treatment plan for patients when something is found so, yes, we're able to biopsy and diagnose you but then we're also able to treat you which is also important with

radiation oncology, medical oncology and of course the surgical piece which is run by me. You know we've got the full complement and that includes plastic surgery which is another thing that often times many women in the Bronx don't have access to right which is they may need reconstruction but they don't have access to you know high quality reconstruction as well you know so we're doing all of the latest in reconstruction techniques here at St. Barnabas including nipple sparing and skin sparing mastectomies when we have to.

And that's at the time of surgery too?

Right that is correct yes.

I know you've been outspoken about the fact that women in our community are at greater risk or tend to have a greater incidence of breast cancer than women in suburban areas or in other parts of the country and you know this is something it's sort of it's not a level playing field that you've been getting in many years that you've been practicing that it's women of color and women in communities like ours who were most at risk.

What I'm really pointing to is that particularly women of African ancestry get breast cancer at younger ages and they get a more aggressive form of breast cancer so even though white women nationwide lead in terms of the group that has the highest number of breast cancer cases the population at greatest risk for more aggressive breast cancer, the triple negative disease, the more advanced stages, is our population you know and again having said all of that here at SBH when we compared our numbers against every zip code in the five boroughs of New York City we actually beat every zip code in terms of early detection of breast cancer and that includes upper east side, upper west side, Wall Street, Grammercy, Staten Island, we actually beat all of these wealthy zip codes in terms of our rate of early detection and I'm clear it's because of our robust screening system which doesn't just include the wellness center you have to remember even though it was closed during the pandemic we do have the mobile mammography program that meets the community where they are to provide the service and to make sure that we're screening our community so that we can pick up cancer at its earliest stages because again despite all of the advances in breast cancer the number one thing and the number two and the number three thing that protects you against dying from breast cancer is early detection, early detection, early detection, number one two and three.

Well you brought it up why don't we talk a little bit about the mammography van and you know what is it doing, where is it going, how does it work?

Well right now it's we haven't and during the pandemic it has not been going on but usually the mobile mammography van goes out into the community, to churches, to community board organizations, we partner with different groups within the community and we make sure that the community knows that we're coming ahead of time. You can actually schedule ahead of time because you know it's going to be by your apartment complex or at your church and we come out and we do screening, mammography all day and then with those women who, once the mammograms are read, we find something that needs further workup then those patients are invited and given an appointment to come to the hospital to get their diagnostic work up which

may include biopsy and they have the opportunity to see me or one of our providers for a breast exam as well so it's all inside of our attempt to make sure that our community knows that they have a medical home. We want people to know they have a medical home that's safe where they can come and receive the care that they need and this is our attempt to meet the community where they are during their busy lives when they're working that we can come to the community you can get your screening where you are.

Okay Dr Petersen, what's your last word to the women of the Bronx, what would you tell them.

I just want them to know we're here for them, we support them. We've got their back and we're here to meet their needs and that includes the needs of their family, their children, their whole household, we're here to meet their needs.

I understand you don't even need to make an appointment you can actually walk in at the women's imaging center, is that right?

That's correct you can walk in and if you know we'll try to accommodate you and if the if the wait is going to be done you need to come back tomorrow we can work that out as well but walk right in and we'll take care of you.

Okay terrific thank you Dr. Petersen for a few minutes today we really appreciate it. And to our listeners, thank you for joining SBH Bronx Health Talk. For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.com. Until next time