

October 20, 2014

Dear Fellow Physicians,

October is breast cancer awareness month. Breast cancer affects one out of every eight women. With more than 6,000 new cases a year in Georgia, breast cancer is one of the most diagnosed cancers in our state. Each year, nearly 1,000 women die of the disease. Thanks to advances in screening and treatment, many women who are diagnosed in Georgia this year will be cured.

As a state, our screening rates are highest among insured women. However, sadly, there are many others who will be diagnosed with advanced stage disease. We still need to increase our screening and early detection rates among our higher risk population, including women with less than a college education; black women; women with a family history of breast cancer; and, women without health insurance coverage. And, we need to begin long before these women reach the age of 40, when annual mammography screenings are recommended.

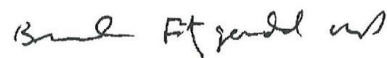
Screening and managing risk should begin around age 18 with a discussion about a woman's family history of breast and ovarian cancer. By discussing family history and any diagnoses of breast or ovarian cancer in a woman's family, you can determine if that woman should be screened for the BRCA gene mutations. Hereditary breast cancer represents 5 to 10 percent of all breast cancers. These gene mutations are associated with a higher risk for development of breast and ovarian cancer.

Because we know that your time with patients is limited, together with Emory University and Georgia CORE, the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) has developed www.BreastCancerGeneScreen.org. The tool on this website can help you and your patients determine whether a woman would benefit from a referral for genetic counseling and is recommended by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF).

If you identify an uninsured woman in need of further genetic counseling and screening, through a special partnership, the Georgia Department of Public Health and Georgia's local health departments are able to offer breast and cervical genetic counseling and screening to some uninsured women each year. These women should be referred to their local health department for additional information. Or, visit DPH's Breast and Cervical Cancer Program online to access more information about the state's breast cancer screening and treatment services (www.dph.ga.gov).

On behalf of the Department and our cancer screening and treatment programs, I also want to thank you for sharing with your patients the importance of annual mammograms between the ages of 40 and 64. And, thank you for helping us to ensure that there are resources available for women who are uninsured. DPH's Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention program provides more than 15,000 mammograms each year, and we know many of you across the state are counseling women on family history and helping to fund many more for women without the ability to pay. We appreciate all you do for the health of Georgians.

Sincerely,



Brenda Fitzgerald, MD
Commissioner, Georgia Department of Public Health

