

Mammography and Prevention: Words Matter

When the US Prevention Services Task Force announced its new recommendations for screening, the announcement included an editorial intriguingly entitled: "Evidence-based Breast Cancer *Prevention*: The Importance of Individual Risk." (Emphasis added)

The first line of the editorial reads as follows:

Widespread use of screening mammography has been the mainstay of breast cancer *prevention* in the United States for the past 25 years.
(emphasis added)

Needless to say, we at BCA were surprised to read this sentence, since, as we know, mammograms detect breast cancer, they don't prevent the disease.

We understand that the term prevention in the context of mammography means something far different to the public health community than it does to the general public. Because there is a long history of mammography being talked about as "prevention," there are many women who actually believe that, by having a mammogram, they won't get breast cancer. After all, what the general public understands by the word is that, if they do "x", they won't get "y."

In the same editorial, the following statement about the kind of education that is needed to advance the new screening recommendations appears:

Health professionals will need education about how to communicate breast cancer risk to women, potential benefits and harms of prevention interventions, and how to assist women in understanding which factors might influence their choice to have an intervention or not.

We at Breast Cancer Action could not agree more. But what we need to get to this point is a common, sensible language that all of us can use to talk about mammography and breast cancer issues. Let's start with using the word "prevention" in its generally understood meaning.