

Senator Tom Harkin
Mammogram Hearing Opening Statement
February 28, 2002

Thank you, Senator Mikulski and thank you for joining me in chairing this joint hearing on the benefits of mammography. I am pleased that we have such a distinguished panel of witnesses with us this afternoon. I particularly want to welcome the new director of NCI, Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach, who is making his first appearance before our subcommittee.

Breast cancer is a disease I take very seriously. I lost my only two sisters to this killer. Sadly, they contracted the disease at a time when regular mammograms and improved treatment methods were not widely used or available. I'm convinced to this day had they gotten regular screenings, they would have lived longer lives.

We have a breast cancer epidemic in this country. Every three minutes, a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, and every 13 minutes, a woman dies from the disease. We need to wage a war against this epidemic. And as with any war, you want all the tools in your arsenal to maximize your chance of victory. And so while there have been conflicting studies, I believe we need to keep screening mammography in our arsenal. In fact, for women age 50 to 69, there is strong evidence that screening with mammograms on a regular basis reduces breast cancer deaths by 25 percent to 30 percent.

I have read quite a bit about the new study by a pair of Danish researchers. I have also heard that this has led to a lot of confusion by woman facing the decision of whether to be screened regularly.

Yesterday, I talked by phone to a number of clinicians and breast cancer survivors in Iowa. There was no confusion with them. These Iowans, who work with patients every day feel very strongly about the benefits of mammography and the early detection that it provides. Every one of them had a personal story about an Iowan, whose cancer was detected early by a mammogram, and is now doing very well. They all agreed that access to mammography is critical. Especially for Medicare beneficiaries.

So I believe we need to redouble our efforts to maintain women's access to screening. That means improving Medicare's unacceptably low reimbursement rates and continuing to expand the breast and cervical cancer screening program.

But, let me be clear, mammography is not a cure all. We need to continue our efforts to improve treatments and eventually develop a vaccine or cure for breast cancer. That is the ultimate victory. And the key is research. A decade ago, the federal government spent barely \$90 million on breast cancer research. Today, I am proud to say, we've increased that investment to about \$800 million. That investment is leading to new discoveries about the causes of breast cancer and its prevention, detection, diagnosis, treatment and control.

Given the stakes, I'm very interested to hear from the experts we have here today. With that, I'll turn to my colleague, Senator Specter, for his opening statement.