

## Public Not Aware of Dangers of Overdiagnosis



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According to new research published in the journal PLOS ONE, only one in ten Australians report being told about the risk of overdiagnosis by their doctors.

Overdiagnosis is an increasingly recognised problem. Often, healthy people are screened for diseases such as prostate or breast cancer and are victims of unnecessary labelling and treatment.

The research was conducted through a telephone survey and included 500 Australians. The participants were asked if they had been screened for breast or prostate cancer and if yes, whether they had been informed about the risk of overdiagnosis. This is the first research of its kind where the general community has been asked about their knowledge and views on overdiagnosis.

Approximately, 80 percent of the men who were screened for prostate cancer said they were not informed about the risk of overdiagnosis. Similarly, approximately 90 percent of women screened for breast cancer said they were not told about the risk of overdiagnosis. Only one in ten people said they have been informed about overdiagnosis. Around 93 percent of the participants wanted to be given more information on the benefits and harms of screening.

One of the major causes of overdiagnosis is attributed to the financial conflicts of interest which many experts have with healthcare companies. Nearly 80 percent of the participants believed it was inappropriate that medical experts have financial relationships with pharmaceutical companies.

While there is no doubt that screening programmes can save lives, at the same time they can also cause some people harm including overdiagnosis. According to recent estimates, 1 in 5 cancers in the UK that are diagnosed via breast cancer screening may be over-diagnosed. The United States Preventive Services Task Force estimates that as many as 1 in 2 prostate cancers may be overdiagnosed.

Another survey by the Health Affairs in the U.S. estimated that more than 20,000 women a year may be overdiagnosed for breast cancer in a year. This translates into a cost of more than U.S. \$1 billion.

Author Professor Kirsten McCaffery of the Sydney University says "Our survey results show we need to better inform the community about the harms as well as benefits of screening including the important harm of overdiagnosis."

Source: University of Sydney

Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons

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