



Letter

Breast cancer mortality in Sweden

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Levi and colleagues presented in this journal an article on the fall in breast cancer mortality for 32 European countries [1]. Data were abstracted from the World Health Organization database using the world standard population. The data presented for the different age groups may, however, lead to misinterpretations. Changes in death rates per 100 000 women from breast cancer are based on single years instead of a closer trend analysis on all of the years within the age span. Levi and colleagues stated for Sweden that between 1988 and 1996 there has been a 32.1% decrease in the age group 20–49 years, a 5.3% decrease in the age group 50–69 years and a 16.0% decrease in those 70–79 years of age. These results have been referred to as an indication of the poor effects of mammography screening in Sweden. All women are invited to mammography screening in Sweden, but the age groups invited differ for different regions. The introductory year varies from 40 to 50 years of age. As illustrated in Table 1, it is

evident that there are large variations from year to year, at least in small countries like Sweden. The decrease in breast cancer mortality is actually not so large in the youngest age group and more pronounced in the age span 50–79 years of age. In those aged 80 years and older there is an increase.

International comparisons are a valuable tool giving indications for the impact of prevention and treatment strategies in different countries. In the case of Sweden, the low and decreasing death rates in the age span 50–79 years argues in favour of intensive mammography screening activities. However, we cannot exclude the impact of other factors and ecological analysis should always be interpreted with caution.

Reference

1. Levi F, Lucchini F, Negri E, La Vecchia C. *Eur J Cancer* 2001, 37, 1409–1412.

Table 1

Age standardised death rates per 100 000 women from breast cancer in Sweden between 1987 and 1999^a

Age groups	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
20–49	8.4	11.2	10.7	10.4	8.8	8.7	9.3	9.4	9.1	7.6	8.3	9.5	8.2
50–69	60.1	58.7	54.1	58.5	58.5	63.3	56.1	54.0	57.9	55.6	51.7	57.0	50.0
70–79	102.3	108.9	103.4	92.0	97.2	97.0	95.7	90.6	91.3	91.5	83.9	83.6	83.9
80+	142.2	166.9	160.8	151.1	164.8	150.4	162.2	152.6	162.5	170.5	169.4	164.4	170.0

^a Age groups (in years) 20–49, 50–69, 70–79 and 80+. World standard population.

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