

4 Earlier is not necessarily better

In the first three chapters we have shown how treatments that are inadequately tested can cause serious harm. Here we turn our attention to screening apparently well people for early signs of illness. Screening sounds so sensible – how better to ward off serious consequences of disease and stay healthy? While screening is helpful for several conditions, screening can harm as well as help.

In this chapter we draw on various disease examples to show why earlier diagnosis can be but is not always better; why many types of screening are of no, or uncertain, benefit; and how the

FROM PERSON TO PATIENT

Screening will inevitably turn some people who test 'positive' into patients – a transformation not to be undertaken lightly. 'If a patient asks a medical practitioner for help, the doctor does the best possible. The doctor is not responsible for defects in medical knowledge. If, however, the practitioner initiates screening procedures the doctor is in a very different situation. The doctor should, in our view, have conclusive evidence that screening can alter the natural history of the disease in a significant proportion of those screened.'

Cochrane AL, Holland WW. Validation of screening procedures.
British Medical Bulletin 1971;27:3-8.

benefits of screening have often been oversold and the harms downplayed or ignored.

Screening healthy people should never be undertaken lightly; there are always important downsides that should make us cautious. Screening is a medical intervention. Not only that, the offer of screening is in itself an intervention. Even someone who chooses to decline screening will be left with a nagging doubt about whether they have made the 'right' decision – that is human nature. *Not* being offered screening in the first place is very different.

At best, screening should only be offered to the healthy people it seeks to reassure or treat if there is sound evidence that: (a) it will do more good than harm at an affordable cost; and (b) it will be delivered as part of a good quality and well-run programme (see below).¹

Screening is much more than a 'one-off' test. People invited for screening need sufficient unbiased, relevant information so that they can decide whether to accept the offer or not – that is, they need to know what they are letting themselves in for (see below).²

One way of thinking about screening is like this:

Screening = a test plus an effective management strategy