Title: Quantifying the Contribution of Earlier Detection and Advances in Treatment on the Gain in Life Expectancy for US Breast Cancer Patients Since 1975

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**ABSTRACT**

Importance: The intense controversy over mammography screening arose and persists, in part, because of disagreement over the relative contribution of earlier detection versus advances in breast cancer treatment.

Objective: To quantify the contributions of earlier detection and advances in breast cancer treatment, accounting for concurrent advances in the treatment of other diseases, to the gain in life expectancy among breast cancer patients since 1975.

Design:  Longitudinal analyses of consecutive annual cohorts of women diagnosed with breast cancer between 1975 and 2002.  Each cohort followed forward for 10 years and cause of death, if applicable, categorized as breast cancer or all other causes.  The date of final follow-up was December 31, 2012.

Setting: United States, 1975 to 2012.

Participants: Newly diagnosed breast cancer patients with both malignant and non-malignant (e.g., ductal carcinoma in situ) behavior who resided in 1 of 9 population-based registries of the National Cancer Institute Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) program (N = 422,141).  Patients categorized by age, year, and tumor size at diagnosis determined by clinical and operative/pathological assessment (<1cm, 1-2cm, 2-3cm, 3-5cm, ≥5cm), and cause of death (breast cancer and all other causes).

Main Outcomes and Measures: The gain in life expectancy of newly diagnosed breast cancer patients between 1975 and 2002 and the contribution to this gain from: [1] earlier detection, [2] advances in breast cancer treatment, and [3] advances in the treatment of other diseases.

Results: Life expectancy increased 10.94 years between 1975 and 2002 for a 40-year old newly diagnosed breast cancer patient.  Advances in breast cancer treatment contributed more to this gain in life expectancy than earlier detection: 6.79 years (62%) versus 2.92 years (27%).  Advances in the treatment of other diseases contributed the remaining 1.25 years to this gain (11%).  By age group, earlier detection contributed approximately equally to the gain in life expectancy among 40-49 year olds (0.56 years) as it did for 50-59 and 60-69 year olds (0.45 and 0.41 years, respectively).

Conclusions and Relevance: Life expectancy among breast cancer patients increased over time primarily because of advances in breast cancer treatment, although earlier detection also contributed substantially.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Mammography screening is intensely controversial.1–10 In 2002, the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommended routine mammography screening among women aged 40-49 years. But in 2009, the USPSTF downgraded its earlier recommendation. The lower grade led to public outcry and prompted Congress to intervene and pass an amendment to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act stipulating insurers must follow the 2002—not the 2009—USPSTF recommendation.

The controversy over screening persists because of disagreement over the precise contributions of screening and advances in breast cancer treatment on the survival of breast cancer patients. Quantifying these contributions requires simultaneous assessment of three components: [1] changes in the distribution of stage at diagnosis over time because women diagnosed at earlier stages typically live longer than women diagnosed at later stages, [2] better breast cancer treatments that reduce fatality rates from breast cancer, and [3] better prevention and treatment of other diseases that are leading causes of death. A previous study only estimated the contribution of screening and attributed the remainder to breast cancer treatment.11 We hypothesize that this study overestimated the contribution of breast cancer treatment because it failed to consider the substantial improvements in the treatment of other diseases that independently increased survival among the growing number of women diagnosed with early stage breast cancer (e.g., cardiovascular disease). Other studies only focus on the reduction in breast cancer-specific mortality rates rather than reductions in overall mortality rates and, consequently, ignored the substantial improvements in the prevention and treatment of other diseases.1,12  Thus, these studies could not quantify the contribution of screening to the increase in survival of breast cancer patients over time.

In this study, we address these research gaps and quantify the contribution of the three components that could have led to the gain in life expectancy among breast cancer patients. We improve prior research in three ways: (a) our analytic approach mathematically accounts for the effects of these components, (b) we base our results on the observed mortality experience of actual breast cancer patients rather than on simulation of the progression of breast cancer, and (c) we utilize case fatality rates, thus avoiding biases inherent in survival time data (e.g., length-time bias). We measure earlier detection, which resulted from more widespread screening and advances in screening technology,13 through changes over time in the distribution of tumor sizes of newly diagnosed breast cancer patients. We measure advances in breast cancer treatment and treatment of other diseases, which resulted from improvements in the delivery of existing treatments and development of novel treatments,14,15 through reductions in tumor size-specific case fatality rates from breast cancer and competing causes of death, respectively. We also quantify the contribution of earlier detection to gains in life expectancy by age at diagnosis, which directly addresses the controversy over the value of screening at different ages. We focus on contributions to the gain in life expectancy, rather than declines in breast cancer mortality rates, to account for concurrent improvements in mortality from competing causes of death and changes in the age structure of the US female population. Finally, we vary the assumed prevalence of overdiagnosis and re-quantify contributions to the gain in life expectancy.

**2. METHODS**

**2.1 Analytic Methods**. Our analytic approach consists of two steps (Figure 1). The first step estimates the contribution of earlier detection to gains in life expectancy (component [1]). We began with all-cause incidence-based case fatality rates (hereafter “fatality rates”) by tumor size (Section 2.2). We adjusted these fatality rates for overdiagnosis because overdiagnosed cases artificially lower observed fatality rates (Section 2.3, eAppendix B). The adjusted tumor size-specific fatality rates served as input to demographic life tables that produced tumor size-specific life expectancies in 1975 and 2002 (eAppendix C). We calculated overall life expectancy in 1975 and 2002 as the weighted average of tumor-size specific life expectancies, where weights corresponded to the annual distribution of incident breast cancers by tumor size also adjusted for overdiagnosis (overdiagnosed cases artificially raise the observed proportion of smaller sized tumors, eAppendix B). The gain in life expectancy was then computed as the difference in overall life expectancy for cohorts formed in 1975 and 2002 and followed forward 10 years. Next, we utilized an established demographic method (Kitagawa decomposition16) to estimate how much of this gain was due to changes in the annual distribution of incident breast cancers by tumor size (i.e., more small tumors over time) and improvements in adjusted all-cause fatality rates.

The second step estimates the contribution of advances in breast cancer treatment (component [2]) and advances in the treatment of other diseases (component [3]) on gains in life expectancy. We began with tumor size-specific fatality rates from breast cancer and all other causes. We then adjusted these rates for overdiagnosis. The adjusted tumor size- and cause-specific fatality rates served as the input to demographic life tables (one for breast cancer and the other for all other causes) that produced corresponding life-years in 1975 and 2002. We then utilized a related demographic method (Beltrán-Sánchez decomposition17) to estimate how much of the contribution of improvements in adjusted all-cause fatality rates was due to improvements in adjusted fatality rates from breast cancer and from all other causes. We did not report sampling uncertainty in the gain in life expectancy or its three components because our calculations used registry data that fully captured the mortality experience of defined populations.17 We mathematically describe the methods in eAppendix D-G.

**2.2 Patient Data.** We obtained incidence and mortality data for breast cancer from the SEER 9 registry database. We analyzed 663,860 breast cancer cases diagnosed between 1975 and 2012 and included cases with both malignant and non-malignant (e.g., ductal carcinoma in situ) behavior. SEER classifies breast cancer as the cause of death based on the death certificate and identity of a primary tumor.18 We placed a further requirement: the breast cancer death must have occurred within 10 years of diagnosis. By allowing this 10-year time window between diagnosis and death, we mitigated potential lead time bias by limiting the length of time over which a death labeled as breast cancer on the death certificate would be categorized as a breast cancer death in our analysis. A fatality rate for a specific cohort of newly diagnosed breast cancer patients equals the ratio of the number of deaths occurring for this cohort and the total number of person-years lived by this cohort up to 10 years beyond their diagnosis (eAppendix A).19,20 We calculated fatality rates for 422,141 breast cancer patients by 5-year age groups at diagnosis (40-44,…,≥100 years), year of diagnosis (1975 and 2002), tumor size determined by clinical and operative/pathological assessment (<1cm, 1-2cm, 2-3cm, 3-5cm, ≥5cm), and cause of death (breast cancer or all other causes). We also calculated the distribution of incident cancer cases by tumor size at diagnosis and year of diagnosis. We calculate fatality rates, rather than death certificate-based mortality rates, because the former enables us to separate rates by tumor size at diagnosis.

**2.3 Adjustment for Overdiagnosis.** Overdiagnosis is the detection of asymptomatic breast cancers that are so slow-growing that they would never present symptomatically.21 For our primary analysis, we assumed an overdiagnosis prevalence of 10% for tumors ≤3cm.22 We conducted two sensitivity analyses on the assumed prevalence of overdiagnosis: [1] varied it to 52% for tumors ≤3cm based on highest estimate from published literature23–27 and [2] varied it to 97% for tumors <1cm (because 97% of SEER patients diagnosed with <1cm tumors survived at least 10 years and, thus, *could* have been overdiagnosed) and to 52% for 1-3cm tumors.

**3. RESULTS**

**3.1. Incidence Rates, Proportion of Tumor Sizes, and Case Fatality Rates.** Both the incidence rate and proportion of <1cm and 1-2cm tumors increased between 1975 and 2002 (Figure 2, Panels A and B).  For example, the incidence rate of <1cm tumors rose from 42 to 350 cases per 100,000 person-years.  In contrast, the incidence rates of 2-3cm, 3-5cm and ≥5cm increased from 1975, peaked around 1984, and decreased thereafter.  The annual proportion of <1cm and 1-2cm tumors grew over time because their incidence rates increased more than those of larger sized tumors.

For patients diagnosed with <1cm, 1-2cm, 2-3cm, and 3-5cm tumors, fatality rates from other causes were higher than those from breast cancer (Figure 2, Panel C).  Only for patients diagnosed with ≥5cm tumors were fatality rates from breast cancer larger than those from other causes.  Overall, the decrease in fatality rates, both from breast cancer and other causes, led to an increase in tumor size-specific life expectancies; the growing proportion of smaller size tumors placed greater weight on these tumor-size specific life expectancies as drivers of overall life expectancy.

**3.2. Analysis of Gains in Life Expectancy.** The decrease in fatality rates and redistribution in the proportion of tumor sizes led to a 10.94-year gain in overall life expectancy for a 40-year-old newly diagnosed breast cancer patient between 1975 and 2002 (Figure 3). The temporal shift towards smaller sized tumors contributed 2.92 years to this gain (27%). Improvements in case fatality rates from breast cancer contributed 6.79 years to this gain (62%). Reductions in case fatality rates from competing causes of death across all tumor sizes contributed the remaining 1.25 years to this gain (11%).

**3.3 Contribution of Earlier Detection to Overall Gain in Life Expectancy by Age Group.** Earlier detection among 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80-89 year olds contributed approximately equally in absolute terms to the overall 2.92-year contribution of earlier detection: between 0.41 to 0.72 years of life (Table 1). Thus, earlier detection in these age groups each contributed to between 3.8% and 6.6% to the gain in life expectancy.

**3.4. Effect of Overdiagnosis.** As the assumed prevalence of overdiagnosis increased from 10% to 52% for tumors ≤3cm, the absolute contribution from improvements in case fatality rates from breast cancer remained virtually identical while the contribution from earlier detection and gain in life expectancy both decreased (Figure 4). Thus, the proportionate contribution from improvements in case fatality rates from breast cancer increased while the proportionate contribution from earlier detection decreased. We also independently varied the overdiagnosis prevalence for <1cm tumors and 1-3cm tumors and reached similar conclusions (eAppendix H).

**4. Discussion**

Our study quantifies the contribution of earlier detection and advances in breast cancer treatment on gains in life expectancy for newly diagnosed breast cancer patients. Accurately measuring these contributions depends on accounting for improvements in the treatment of competing causes of death for breast cancer patients. Our results provide a more precise estimate of these contributions because they are based on the observed mortality experience of actual breast cancer patients without the use of simulation models and their requisite—though untestable—assumptions about the progression of breast cancer. Overall, we found the majority of the gain in life expectancy between 1975 and 2002 resulted from advances in breast cancer treatment (62%), followed by earlier detection (27%) and advances in the treatment of other diseases (11%).

Our results directly address the longstanding controversy over the value of screening at different ages.3,30 We conclude that earlier detection among 40-49 year olds provided approximately equal benefit, measured in the contribution to the gain in life expectancy, as it did among 50-59 and 60-69 year olds. The similar contribution from earlier detection may be partly due to similar increases in mammography screening rates for these age groups across time.31

Based on our methods, which require fewer assumptions than previous work, we believe that our results provide a more accurate estimate of the contribution of earlier detection and advances in cancer treatment to the gain in life expectancy. For instance, we prove mathematically and demonstrate empirically that the CISNET modeling approach28 yields biased estimates of life expectancy and the gain in life expectancy (eAppendix I).  Consider the gain in life expectancy for US women between 1975 and 2002.  Under the CISNET approach, life expectancy at birth would have equaled 68.13 years in 1975 and 72.58 years in 2002 (a gain of 4.46 years).Yet, life expectancy at birth actually equaled 76.45 years in 1975 and 79.62 years in 2002 (a gain of 3.17 years).   Thus, the CISNET approach produces a bias of 1.50 years (4.46–3.17 years) for the gain in life expectancy.  In contrast to the CISNET approach, we jointly model life expectancy from breast cancer and all other causes of death using a competing risk approach: overall survival equals the product of survival from breast cancer and survival from other causes of death.  Our approach—by construction—yields an unbiased estimate of life expectancy and the gain in life expectancy.

Our study also reduces uncertainty over the contributions of earlier detection and advances in breast cancer treatment to the gain in life expectancy. The CISNET approach is to have several groups model the problem independently, which results in a range of estimates. CISNET simulated the progression of breast cancer using seven distinct models that varied between six and forty separate parameters, some of which rely on untestable assumptions about rates of breast cancer progression from small non-invasive tumor to malignant cancer.29 One CISNET model estimated the contribution of earlier detection to the decline in breast cancer mortality rates to be 28%, whereas another model estimated it to be 65% (1975-2000).1 Just as the CISNET models estimated a wide range of the contribution of earlier detection, so too was the estimated range for the contribution of breast cancer treatment: between 35 and 72% on the decline in breast cancer mortality rates.1 These range correspond to equivalent contributions on the resulting gain in life expectancy of between 16% and 50% for earlier detection and between 50% and 84% for advances in breast cancer treatment. During the same time period, we used life tables based on the actual experience of breast cancer patients to estimate that earlier detection contributed 28% and advances in breast cancer treatment contributed 62% of the gain in life expectancy. Overall, our calculation of the contribution of earlier detection is broadly similar to many of the CISNET models, although we arrive at this conclusion using methods that require fewer assumptions and are less susceptible to bias.

Advances in the prevention and treatment of competing causes of death, such as cardiovascular disease (CVD),32,33 made an increasing contribution to the gain in life expectancy among breast cancer patients from 1975 to 2002 partly because of the trend toward earlier detection. After breast cancer itself, other cancers and CVD were the second and third leading causes of death among breast cancer patients.34 For early stage breast cancers, which are also usually smaller sized tumors, the probability of death from other causes is considerably higher than the corresponding probability of death from breast cancer (Figure 2, Panel C).34 Thus, improvements in the treatment of other diseases are particularly important for the overall gain in life expectancy of breast cancer patients because the proportion of smaller sized tumors grew over time. And as treatment of other diseases improved, so did the size of the population who could benefit most from these advances.

Our study has some potential limitations.  First, our life table methods and resulting estimates of life expectancy assume that breast cancer patients experience a set of fatality rates, which vary by age and time, based on their year of breast cancer diagnosis (‘period life expectancy’) rather than on their year of birth (‘cohort life expectancy’).  This assumption may produce a biased estimate of the gain in life expectancy.  To evaluate this bias, we could calculate the difference in the gain in cohort life expectancies and the gain in period life expectancies.  Yet, cohort life expectancy can only be computed retrospectively after all individuals in the cohort have died, which is not the case, for example, for patients diagnosed in 2002.  To overcome this inherent constraint, we calculate period and cohort temporary life expectancy, which equals the total number of person-years lived between two ages in a life table based on a set of period and cohort fatality rates, respectively.  Based on these temporary life expectancies, we estimated a small and conservative bias of 0.48 years in the gain in life expectancy when using period-based fatality rates rather than cohort-based fatality rates (eAppendix J).  Thus, our use of period-based fatality rates largely captures the lived experience of breast cancer patients.

Second, we cannot quantify the contribution of individual types of treatment because patients typically received multiple modalities. Third, we cannot quantify the contribution of specific factors that produced the observed effectiveness of detection (e.g., improved standards in the interpretation of mammograms) because SEER does not capture screening information or the circumstances leading to diagnosis. Fourth, we do not quantify the contribution of earlier detection and advances in breast cancer treatment after the introduction of a specific innovation. The effect of specific innovations is difficult to track because the diffusion of novel chemotherapy agents, imaging modalities, and clinical and surgical techniques occurs slowly over time rather than immediately after introduction.35,36 Finally, we required that breast cancer death must have occurred within 10 years of diagnosis when calculating case fatality rates to partially mitigate lead time bias. We vary the interval between 8-12 years and reach identical substantive conclusions (eAppendix K).

In conclusion, several factors contributed to the gain in life expectancy for breast cancer patients.  More widespread screening increased the proportion of small-sized tumors among newly diagnosed breast cancer patients. At the same time, incremental improvements in medical care reduced the risk of death among breast cancer patients from breast cancer itself. As patients lived longer, they also benefited from advances in treating other diseases, such as CVD, from which they otherwise have died. We apply existing demographic methods to disentangle the precise contribution of earlier detection and advances in breast cancer treatment on the gain in life expectancy, accounting for concurrent advances in the treatment of other diseases. Life expectancy among breast cancer patients increased over time primarily because of advances in breast cancer treatment, although earlier detection also contributed substantially.

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**Figure Titles and Legends**

Figure 1. Overview of Analytic Method

Incidence-based case fatality rates (all-cause, breast cancer, and all other causes) and the annual distribution of incident breast cancer by tumor size serve as inputs to the demographic-based methods that estimate the constituent components of the gain in life expectancy: [1] contribution from change in tumor-size distribution (earlier detection), [2] contribution from changes in case fatality rates from breast cancer (advances in breast cancer treatment), and [3] contribution from changes in case fatality rates from other causes (advances in treatment of other diseases).

Figure 2. Breast Cancer Incidence Rates, Tumor Size Distribution, and Case Fatality Rates

(A) Incidence rates (cases per 100,000 person-years) by tumor size, 1975-2002. (B) Annual distribution of incident breast cancer cases by tumor size, 1975-2002. (C) Incidence-based case fatality rates from breast cancer and from all other causes of death, 1975-2002.

Figure 3. Contribution of Earlier Detection, Advances in Breast Cancer Treatment, and Advances in Treatment of Competing Diseases on Gain in Life Expectancy

Overall gain in life expectancy and the contribution of the temporal shift in tumor size (by tumor size and net contribution) and reductions in case fatality rates from breast cancer and competing causes of death.

Figure 4. Contributions to Gain in Life Expectancy, Varying Assumed Prevalence of Overdiagnosis

Overall gain in life expectancy and its constituent components (temporal shift in tumor size, reductions in case fatality rates from breast cancer, and reductions in case fatality rates from competing causes of death) varying the assumed prevalence of overdiagnosis for tumors ≤3cm from 0% to 52%.

Table 1. Contribution of Earlier Detection on Gain in Life Expectancy

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age Group (Years Old) | Contribution to Gain in Life Expectancy | |
| Years of Life  (1) | Percentage Contribution  (2)=100\*(1)/10.94 |
| 40-49 | 0.56 | 5.12 |
| 50-59 | 0.45 | 4.11 |
| 60-69 | 0.41 | 3.75 |
| 70-79 | 0.72 | 6.58 |
| 80-89 | 0.65 | 5.94 |
| 90-99 | 0.12 | 1.10 |
| ≥100 | 0.01 | 0.09 |
| Total | 2.92 | 26.69 |