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Experts back expanded FOBT program

12th Sep 2011 [Danny Rose](#) [all articles by this author](#)

FURTHER evidence has emerged showing the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) is detecting more disease at an earlier stage, bolstering calls for its broader implementation.

A South Australian based study found the NBCSP led to the detection of stage A cancer at almost double the rate of early cancer diagnosed outside the screening program.

Close to half (43.1%) of all screen-detected cancers were in the curable stage whereas the rate of stage A cancers otherwise detected was 22.3%, researchers were due to tell Australian Gastroenterology Week in Brisbane this week.

For cancers not discovered until they had progressed to stage D, just 3.3% were detected in screened patients compared to 14.3% diagnosed outside the program.

“It’s good from both ends of the spectrum really,” said Stephen Cole, principal medical scientist at the Bowel Health Service at Adelaide’s Repatriation General Hospital, who led the research.

“There’s less cancers that would be unlikely to be cured, and we get far more with a chance of cure... We seem to have shifted the balance across the profile.

“Time has moved on and another slice of the data may well show an improvement over this,” he said.

The study encompassed 3500 bowel cancers diagnosed in SA from 2003 to 2008, from the NBCSP pilot and the later rollout of the program, which included a once-off mail-out of FOBT kits to Australians aged 55 and 65, later expanded to also include those turning 50.

Professor Fin Macrae, head of colorectal medicine and genetics at Royal Melbourne Hospital, welcomed the data as “some indication that progress is being made through a screening approach”.

“The [NBCSP] is being sold on the basis of a randomised controlled trial, which screened everybody from 50 to 75, on an annual or biennial basis, and demonstrated a 16–30% reduction in mortality,”

he said.

“And yet that’s not what has been delivered [by the government]... so the benefits we’re going to see as a community are not going to be near those identified in the randomised controlled trial.”

Cancer Council Australia chief executive Professor Ian Olver said the study “shows us the value of the program even in its rudimentary form”.

“But you’d like a situation where it was more difficult to make the comparison because everyone was screened,” he said.

The new data is in line with a Biogrid Australia analysis published in 2009. This study, based on data from 19 hospitals, indicated the NBCSP detected 40% early stage cancers versus 14% found in unscreened patients.

For end-stage cancers, it was 3% in screened patients versus 15%.

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