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To cite this version:

Alain Braillon. Cancer screening: inequalities ... in the data.. International Journal of Epidemiology, 2010, 10.1093/ije/DYQ204 . hal-00640456

HAL Id: hal-00640456

https://hal.science/hal-00640456v1

Submitted on 12 Nov 2011

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
International Journal of Epidemiology

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Journal:	*International Journal of Epidemiology*
Manuscript ID:	IJE-2010-07-0698.R1
Manuscript Type:	Letter to the Editor
Date Submitted by the Author:	23-Aug-2010
Complete List of Authors:	Braillon, Alain; university hospital
Key Words:	screening, public heath, epidemiology, cancer, quality

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Letter to the Editor

Cancer screening: inequalities … in the data.

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Keywords: Cancer screening, inequality, benchmarking

Palencia et al were rightly concerned by inequalities in the use of cancer screening in 2002.(1) The discussion rightly began by an analysis of the strengths and weakness of the study but I am concerned by two points.
The validity of the data could have been discussed, at least for France. The prevalence of breast cancer screening can hardly be found in peer-reviewed journals but data exists.(http://www.invs.sante.fr/presse/2010/communiques/depistage_cancer_sein_060410/index.html) The French organized breast cancer screening programme achieved national coverage in 2004. Acceptance rate for this organized program increased from 40.2 % in 2004 to 49.3 % in 2006 and 52.5 % in 2008 which are far lower than the 79.4 cited by Palencia et al. Even in 2008 and 2009 only one territory, out of a hundred, reached the 70% level (Haute-Vienne), whereas at the opposite end Paris has the lowest rate (28.2 %).
The second point is the relevance of the definition of screening prevalence (ie. "mammography use in the previous 3years."). The benefit of screening programs is evidenced from randomized trials with durations reaching a decade. Evaluating the prevalence of screening by a cross-sectional analysis is misleading ; it overestimates the quality of the programs and therefore the potential benefits.
Last but not least, the publication in 2010 of raw data from 2002 underlines the urgent need for an European Cancer Observatory with adequate funding.(http://eu-cancer.iarc.fr/7-about-eco.html) The large inequalities in cancer care which exist among European countries are not acceptable. Comparison of recent data is mandatory for benchmarking. The results of the healthcare systems must be compared to allow for the disclosure of irrelevant policies and for identification of the best practices. Epidemiology is the key factor for improvement of quality and security of care.

1 Palència L, Espelt A, Rodríguez-Sanz M et al Socio-economic inequalities in breast and cervical cancer screening practices in Europe: influence of the type of screening program. Int. J. Epidemiol. 2010;39: 757–765.

No conflict of interest

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