



# Breast cancer

## HRT and mammography

*From Mr J. Wilks, MPS(Australia)*

SIR,—Public debate over the breast cancer risks associated with post-menopausal hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has recently been reactivated following the publication of the results of a 15-year study conducted in 29 screening centres throughout the United States and involving 46,355 women.

The research found that there was a 20 per cent increased risk of breast cancer for women who had taken oestrogen-only HRT during the previous four years. For women using the more popular combined HRT (containing oestrogen and progestogen) during the previous four years, the risk of breast cancer was increased by 40 per cent, compared with non-users of HRT.<sup>1</sup> These findings are consistent with previously published research on this topic.

Against this background, it is distressing to read a report by Australian researchers Kavanagh *et al*,<sup>2</sup> who have found that mammography testing was 20 per cent less likely to detect a breast cancer in a user of HRT than in a non-user. According to Kavanagh *et al*, HRT users in the 50-69 year age bracket developed higher breast tissue density. Because the breast tissue is denser in HRT users, the mammography test is less able to detect the presence of cancerous lumps.

Based upon these research findings, conducted and reported independently, health care professionals and consumers need to rethink the merits of HRT use. There are many other prescription and non-prescription products now available which will help a woman cope with the symptoms of menopause without the increased risk of a missed diagnosis of developing breast cancer.

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### References

1. Schairer C, Lubin J, Troisi R, Sturgeon S, Brinton L, Hoover R. Menopausal estrogen and estrogen-progestin replacement therapy and breast cancer risk. *JAMA* 2000;283:485-91.
2. Kavanagh AM, Mitchell H, Giles GG. Hormone replacement therapy and accuracy of mammographic screening. *Lancet* 2000;355: 270-4.