



Screening

New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine Policy Statement

Policy Statement

The New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine (NZCPHM) recognises that organised screening programmes have the potential to reduce inequalities and improve population health. However, the NZCPHM also notes that

- screening does not diagnose disease but rather places people into groups at high risk and low risk of developing or having a particular disease or its complications; and
- all screening programmes are finely balanced in terms of harms and benefits.

The NZCPHM calls for the rigorous application of established screening criteria when assessing potential screening programmes and the operation of such programmes within strong quality frameworks. The NZCPHM also recommends that screening programmes provide participants with quality information to help the understanding of concepts of risk, harms and benefits.

Background

Screening is not simply the application of a test to a well population, but is a complex process that is not generally well understood. Screening is defined by the National Health Committee¹ as:

“a health service in which members of a defined population, who do not necessarily perceive they are at risk of, or are already affected by, a disease or its complications, are asked a question or offered a test to identify those individuals who are more likely to be helped than harmed by further tests or treatments to reduce the risk of disease or its complications.”

There are two types of screening – organised screening programmes and opportunistic (ad hoc) screening. Organised screening involves activities along a screening pathway that are planned, coordinated, monitored and evaluated. The screening pathway includes a number of steps from health promotion, recruitment and retention, invitation, screening, further assessment if a positive screen result is returned, and further investigation and treatment as appropriate.

Screening is a process that identifies people who may be at increased risk of the disease or condition being tested. Screening does not diagnose disease or conditions, but it can reduce the chance of developing or dying from some conditions. For those with a high risk or positive screen result further testing is required for a definitive diagnosis. Organised screening is therefore a population-level risk reduction approach.

New Zealanders have access to five organised screening programmes:

1. National Cervical Screening Programme
2. BreastScreen Aotearoa
3. Newborn Metabolic Screen Programme (Guthrie or heel prick test)
4. Universal Newborn Hearing Screening
5. Antenatal HIV Screening.

All screening programmes have the potential for benefit and harm. Benefits include reduction in mortality and morbidity for cancer screening, and early diagnosis to facilitate access to appropriate information, treatment or services for non-cancer screening. Harms include false negative diagnosis (missed cases), false positive diagnosis (anxiety and additional investigation), as well as overdiagnosis and overtreatment. Evidence is accumulating internationally (for example in breast cancer screening) that the benefits may be more modest than predicted and the harms more prominent. There is an ethical obligation, once the invitation is issued, to ensure that screening programmes operate within quality assurance and improvement frameworks to maximise the potential benefits and minimise the potential harms.

A set of criteria have been established for assessing new screening programmes. The World Health Organization criteria have been modified for the New Zealand context by the National Health Committee and include eight criteria¹. In addition, screening programmes need to operate from a cultural context that makes sense to participants and must not exacerbate health inequalities.

The NZCPHM support the rigorous application of screening criteria to any proposed new screening programmes, or reassessment of screening tests in the light of new evidence.

Links with other NZCPHM policies

N/A

References and further Information

1. National Health Committee. Screening to improve health in New Zealand: criteria to assess screening programmes. Wellington: National Health Committee, 2003.
(<http://nhc.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/ScreeningCriteria.pdf>)

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