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New research aims to understand breast cancer treatment inequities

Why do some women with breast cancer decline certain types of treatment? That's the question a collaborative research project funded by Waitemata and Auckland District Health Boards, Health Research Council of New Zealand and the Breast Cancer Foundation seeks to answer.

Breast cancer is the third-leading cause of death for Māori and non-Māori women in NZ. Māori women are more likely to develop breast cancer and to die from it than non-Māori, indicating that there may be inequities in access to treatment for Māori women.

Standard treatment for early breast cancer is breast-conserving surgery followed by radiotherapy, which is delivered daily over several weeks. Radiotherapy is an important step in reducing long-term mortality rates.

However, some groups of women – particularly Māori and Pacific women, lower socio-economic groups and those who live rurally – are less likely to take up, or complete radiotherapy.

The 12-month study, which was identified as a priority under the DHBs' joint Māori Health Plan, will involve use of the national Breast Cancer Register along with focus groups, interviews and a survey with patients in a bid to understand why.

"This collaborative project is a great example of researchers, clinicians, patients, funding bodies and DHBs working together to generate insights that will lead to direct improvement in services," says Director of Health Outcomes Dr Karen Bartholomew, principal investigator on the project.

Dr Bartholomew says findings will be used by the Northern Cancer Network and its four district health boards – Waitemata, Auckland, Northland and Counties Manukau – along with Waikato DHB, to drive improvements.

Waitemata DHB CEO Dr Dale Bramley says patients will have a strong voice throughout this research, ensuring it unearths important new insights and identifies barriers along the treatment pathway.

"In order to provide the very best standards of care to our community, we need a deep understanding of the issues that impact people's choices when it comes to health and wellbeing. Powered by these findings, we can better tailor services to meet current and future demand," says Dr Bramley.

Waitemata and Auckland DHBs have a long-term commitment to improving health outcomes for Māori. This includes a joint screening programme to address higher rates of abdominal aortic aneurysm among Māori and a pilot study that trialled self-sampling to help reduce barriers to cervical screening for Māori women.

In addition, Waitemata DHB's work around safe sleeping options and smoking cessation has resulted in a 63 percent drop in Māori infant mortality across Waitemata since 2001 – well ahead of the national 30 percent decline.

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For further information, contact:

Waitemata DHB Media Line

Phone (09) 487 1276