NY Bill Would Notify Women Of Dense Breast Tissue

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — A bill approved by the state legislature in hopes of increasing the early detection of breast cancer would require that women be given notice in mammography reports if they have dense breast tissue, a condition that makes it harder to detect the life-threatening disease.

The bill passed recently in the Senate and Assembly would require that mammography reports advise women with dense breast tissue to discuss additional screening, such as ultrasound, with their doctors. Failure to provide notice would carry a fine of up to $2,000.

It remained unclear Tuesday if Gov. Andrew Cuomo intended to sign the measure. "We'll be reviewing the bill," Cuomo spokesman Rich Azzopardi said.

There has been no noticeable opposition to the measure. Supporters say 40 percent of women have dense breast tissue, which has less fat and more connective tissue that appears white on a mammogram and can hide tumors. New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn urged Cuomo in a letter to sign the legislation.

"We have heard personal accounts from a number of women who regularly received mammographies and were told their results were normal, when in reality the density of their breast obscured the fact that they had undetected cancerous growths," Quinn said. "A simple additional ultrasound test can help save thousands of women's lives by increasing their chance of identifying breast cancer early on."

One of those personal accounts is that of Margaret Hughes of Brooklyn, mother of a 9-year-old son.

"I think it's important that this be a clear standard," Hughes told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Last December, when she was 48, Hughes underwent surgery for a tumor in her spine that had spread from undetected breast cancer.

"Eight months after I'd had a mammogram that didn't pick it up, I was diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer, which is considered incurable," Hughes said. "I will be in treatment for the rest of my life."

Connecticut, Texas and Virginia have similar notification laws. California Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed a similar bill last year and lawmakers are trying to pass it again. The California Medical Society opposed the legislation, saying the warnings could create unnecessary anxiety.

In 2009, Connecticut became the first state to pass a notification law after lobbying by Nancy Cappello, who had been diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer even after mammograms came up negative. Cappello went on to found the nonprofit Are You Dense, which advocates for notification laws and provides information for women about dense breast tissue.

The American College of Radiology, in a recent position statement, said it doesn't oppose patient notification but urges lawmakers to consider unintended consequences, such as an increased demand for more expensive ultrasound or magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, screening. The organization said both techniques result in additional false positives and there's no data showing ultrasound or MRI screening saves lives.

Health insurance generally doesn't cover an MRI, which costs about $3,000, and an ultrasound, which costs about $500, for routine screening.

In Virginia, radiologists lobbied against the legislation, saying women would be unduly alarmed and burdened with the costs of unnecessary tests. They succeeded in changing the bill's language so it would inform women about density but not suggest other testing.

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