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Grant helps fund cancer screenings

St. Mary's Hospital and Clinic in Cottonwood gets money from Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation

COTTONWOOD - As deadly as breast and cervical cancers can be, many women put off medical exams that could detect life-threatening situations while they could still be remedied.

For the second consecutive year, St. Mary's Hospital and Clinic in Cottonwood has received a \$25,000 grant from the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation to provide wellness exams and mammograms for uninsured and underinsured women ages 18 to 49 in Idaho County.

This year's grant will pay for wellness exams for 100 women and mammograms for 40.

Megan Wilson, a family nurse practitioner with the clinic, said last year during the first year of the grant, more than 125 women were served - most of whom had not had breast or cervical exams for several years.

"I think the majority of the women that we see were not coming in for their annual exams because of cost constraints," Wilson said. "They were aware that they needed to be doing it, but because they were underinsured - meaning they had a real high deductible - or because they had no insurance and didn't qualify for any other programs, they were not coming in to get their exams done. And so with this grant we have helped fill a need in our community."

Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death among women in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Widespread use of screening, along with treatment advances in recent years, has been credited with significant reductions in breast cancer mortality.

In December, however, the U.S. Preventative Services Task Force came out with new recommendations regarding screening for breast cancer.

Wilson said the new recommendations have caused confusion about whether women need to continue mammograms and breast self-examinations. In the past, women from age 40 to 49 were encouraged to have a mammogram every two years, increasing to at least once a year after age 50.

The new recommendations suggest that mammograms on women without high-risk factors from age 40 to 49 are not effective and breast self-exams should not be encouraged. Wilson admits she is stymied by some of the new recommendations. "The recommendations are that if you're between 40 and 50 and considered high-risk, meaning you have a family history of breast cancer or ovarian cancer, or a history of radiation to the chest, those need to be addressed on an individual basis," Wilson said.

"But if you're considered low-risk, (the recommendations are to start biannual mammograms) at age 50. They're finding the majority of women who are picking up their breast cancers in that 40-age group were already at high risk. So with the low-risk population, we were doing a lot of unnecessary screening."

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The rationale for discouraging breast self-exams also had to do with causing patients unnecessary worry and insisting on tests they don't need. But Wilson said she doesn't think it hurts for women to continue examining their own breasts on a regular basis.

One of the issues about the screenings provided by the grant is that even when a test shows an abnormal finding, some women still fail to follow with additional visits.

"This is a problem," Wilson said. "They know there will be extra costs involved and are reluctant to come back. So that's one thing I find frustrating with this grant. After we find something abnormal, the grant doesn't cover any additional testing or anything. So it gets frustrating because what to do at that point for them?"

She points out that of the more than 125 women who were screened through the grant last year, several cases of breast and cervical cancer were detected. Those were patients who had not been having annual exams, Wilson said.

"These patients may have gone years without detection until they had complications or further problems if they had not come in for this."

This year the clinic is hoping to reach even more women who need regular testing through a Girls Night Out party at 5:30 p.m. Feb. 10 at the Cottonwood clinic. The evening will feature refreshments, free goody bags for attendees, door prizes, music and chair massages. Health care providers will be available to perform female wellness exams in the clinic exam rooms.

Anyone wishing more information about the wellness exams and mammograms may contact the Cottonwood clinic at (208) 962-3267.