

Individualising breast cancer treatment to improve survival and minimise complications in older women: a research programme including the PLACE RCT

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Plain English summary

The PLACE RCT

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Plain English summary

Annually, over 44,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer in the UK. Many older women do not receive appropriate management and a disproportionate number of deaths (6500) occur among elderly patients. Patients who are cured can suffer complications of treatment, such as lymphoedema (gross swelling of the arm).

Complications could be avoided by better identification of patients which takes account of variation in risk of recurrence and susceptibility to complications.

To understand the management of older patients, a study of surgical consultations from newly diagnosed patients with operable cancer attending breast units asked who made their decisions about need for surgery, and their subsequent survival was studied.

Risk of arm swelling (lymphoedema) after armpit surgery for breast cancer was studied in a 1100-patient multicentre study, and a trial was undertaken that looked at the benefit of compression garment sleeves to prevent lymphoedema developing in patients after surgery.

Decisions about surgery were made by the surgeons; patient fitness did not predict surgery or complications of treatment. Surgery was associated with a 70% reduction in cancer deaths. Older women were less likely to receive chemotherapy.

Arm swelling was common after surgery, but only 24% of women developed lymphoedema. Women developing lymphoedema had a reduced quality of life up to 2 years after surgery. Baseline measurements and monitoring identified those women most likely to develop lymphoedema.

The PLACE (Prevention of Lymphoedema After Clearance by External compression) trial has not yet reported its results.

Older breast cancer patients need optimal management. Individualised monitoring after surgery allows treatment of arm swelling to improve quality of life.

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