

THE SACRAMENTO BEE sacbee.com

This story is taken from [Sacbee](#) / Opinion

Dr. Ernie Bodai: EARLY Act will save young women's lives

Special to The Bee

Published Thursday, Aug. 13, 2009

One of the most frustrating experiences I have as a breast surgeon is seeing young women suffer potentially catastrophic cases of breast cancer. It's frustrating because they might have avoided the disease's worst consequences – and perhaps prevented the cancer altogether – if they had been better informed about the threat the disease can pose to even young adult women.

A bill being considered in Congress could help reverse this situation and save many lives in the process. The bill is called the Education and Awareness Requires Learning Young Act, or EARLY Act. It was introduced by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., herself a breast cancer survivor.

I led the campaign to create the Breast Cancer Postage Stamp, which raises funds for breast cancer research. The EARLY Act is the next logical step on the national level, because it will help younger adult women know their breast cancer risk and take appropriate steps to optimize their breast health.

This legislation would fund a national campaign for public education about the special risks young women face from breast cancer. In particular, it targets women under 45.

There is a widespread misconception that younger women have very little risk of breast cancer. The facts are quite different. They demonstrate why the EARLY Act's focus on younger women – with additional outreach to certain ethnic and racial groups – is so important.

The most recent numbers from the state Department of Health Services, for example, are that more than 5 percent of Californians who get breast cancer are younger than 40. Black women in California are more likely to die from breast cancer than those in other racial groups, and the disease is on the increase among Asian and Pacific Islander women in our state. Nationally, 20 percent of new breast cancers occur among women younger than 50, about 36,000 women per year – more American women than are diagnosed with cervical and ovarian cancer together.

While younger women are at less risk than their older counterparts, breast cancer is more

likely to kill them if they get it. In fact, the leading cause of death for American women between ages 35 and 50 is breast cancer.

Among other things, the EARLY Act would inform young women about current methods of risk assessment. Mammograms are not very helpful with younger women because their breast density obscures abnormalities.

But scientists have developed valuable new ways to assess risk among young women. These include genetic profiling (where merited) and a simple, five-minute test to painlessly extract and assess nipple fluid.

Women identified as higher risk can then be advised to take advantage of proven risk reduction approaches. These may include diet and exercise programs, preventative medications and increased monitoring with mammograms and other imaging modalities.

The EARLY Act would also help educate physicians, who may have out-of-date information about the latest forms of risk assessment. Finally, the act would provide assistance to young women who have breast cancer.

The funding – \$9 million a year for five years – is small indeed compared with national health care expenditures. If we consider that funding as an investment in preventing cancer or detecting it early, then this is an investment clearly worth making.

Many millions of dollars would be saved by preventing late-stage cancers, which are far more expensive to treat. I can hardly think of a more cost-effective idea than the concept behind this legislation.

The EARLY Act has bipartisan support from more than 360 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives and more than 30 in the Senate. That is a promising start, but the bill still faces an uphill battle.

There are some who don't see why we should be spending money on this effort, because they underestimate the cancer risk faced by young women.

Many mistakenly believe there's nothing that can be done to assess younger women's risk, or to mitigate it. Hopefully, a long-term effect of the EARLY Act will be to raise the entire nation's consciousness about breast cancer risk.

We can dramatically reduce the toll that breast cancer takes on our young women, but only if they have the information that the EARLY Act would provide to them.

ShareThis

Dr. Ernie Bodai is a clinical professor of surgery at UC Davis and director of breast surgical services at Kaiser Permanente Sacramento.