

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Marketing muscle

A million-dollar juggernaut pushes 3D mammograms

By Liz Szabo

Kaiser Health News

When Dr. Wortia McCaskill-Stevens made an appointment for a mammogram last year, she expected a simple breast cancer screening — not a heavy-handed sales pitch.

A receptionist asked if she wanted a free upgrade to a “3D mammogram,” or tomosynthesis.

“She said there’s a new approach and it’s much better, and it finds all cancer,” said McCaskill-Stevens, who declined the offer.

A short time later, a technician asked again: Was the patient sure she didn’t want 3D?

Upselling customers on high-tech breast cancer screenings is just one way the 3D mammography industry aggressively promotes its product.

A KHN investigation found that manufacturers, hospitals, doctors and some patient advocates have put their marketing muscle — and millions of dollars — behind 3D mammograms. The juggernaut has left many women feeling pressured to undergo screenings, which, according to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, haven’t been shown to be more effective than traditional mammograms.

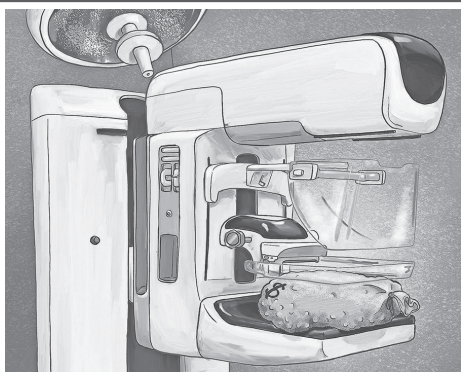
“There’s a lot of money to be made,” said Dr. Steven Woloshin, director of the Center for Medicine and Media at The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice, who published a study in January showing that the health-care industry spends \$30 billion a year on marketing.

KHN’s investigation shows that industry money has shaped policy, public opinion and patient care around 3D by:

- **Paying influential doctors.** In the past six years, 3D equipment manufacturers — including Hologic, GE Healthcare, Siemens Medical Solutions USA and Fujifilm Medical Systems USA — have paid doctors and teaching hospitals more than \$240 million, including more than \$9.2 million related to 3D mammograms, according to a KHN analysis of the Medicare Open Payments database. Just over half of that money was related to research; other payments covered speaking fees, consulting, travel, meals or drinks. The database shows that influential journal articles — those cited hundreds of times by other researchers — were written by doctors with financial ties to the 3D industry.

- **Marketing directly to consumers.** Manufacturers have urged women to demand “the better mammogram,” using celebrity spokeswomen such as breast cancer survivor Sheryl Crow. Manufacturers spent \$14 million to market 3D screening over the past four years, not including spending on social media, according to Kantar Media, which tracks the advertising industry.

- **Lobbying state lawmakers.** Private insurers in 16 states are now legally required to cover 3D screenings, along with Medicaid programs in 36 states and Washington, D.C. Officials at Hologic, the leading manufacturer, told KHN that about



MICHELLE KNODRICH FOR KHN

### \$240 million

3D equipment manufacturers have paid doctors and teaching hospitals more than \$240 million in the last six years, including \$9.2 million related to 3D mammograms.

95% of insured women have coverage for tomosynthesis.

- **Funding experts and advocates.**

Hologic has given educational grants to the American Society of Breast Surgeons, a medical association that recently recommended 3D mammograms as its preferred screening method, according to the group’s website. Hologic declined to reveal amounts. Hologic also has funded patient advocates such as the Black Women’s Health Imperative, which lobbies for access to 3D mammograms.

Enthusiasm for 3D has sparked a medical technology arms race, with hospitals and radiology practices competing to offer the newest equipment. Patients have caught the fever, too. When rural hospitals can’t afford 3D machines, foundations often pitch in to raise money. More than 63% of mammography facilities offer 3D screenings, first approved for sale in 2011.

Taxpayers write the check for many 3D screenings, which add about \$50 to the cost of a typical mammogram. Medicare, which began paying for 3D exams in 2015, spent an additional \$230 million on breast cancer screenings within the first three years of coverage. By 2017, nearly half the mammograms paid for by the federal program were 3D, according to a KHN analysis of federal data.

Hologic’s Peter Valenti said the company’s marketing is educational. His company is a “for-profit organization, but our premise is to try to improve the health care for women globally,” said Valenti, president of Hologic’s breast and skeletal health solutions division.

The debate over 3D mammograms illustrates the tension in the medical community over how much research companies should do before commercializing new products. In a statement, officials at Hologic said it would be “irresponsible and unethical” to withhold technology that detects more breast cancers, given that definitive clinical trials can take many years.

On average, 3D screenings may slightly increase cancer detection rates, finding about one extra breast tumor for every 1,000 U.S. women screened, according to a 2018 analysis in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute. Most studies also show that 3D screenings cause fewer “false alarms,” in which women are called back for procedures they don’t need, said Dr. Susan Harvey, a Hologic vice president.

Yet newer tech isn’t necessarily better — and it can cause harm, said Dr. Otis Brawley, a professor at John Hopkins University. “It’s unethical to push a product before you know it helps people,” he said.



Primary Care. Dental.  
Counseling. Family Planning.

*Everyone welcome.  
Most insurances accepted.  
Call 315-536-2752 for  
an appointment today.*

Medical: 112 Kimball Ave., Penn Yan  
Dental: 160 Main St., Penn Yan

Also located in:  
BATH • GENEVA • SODUS  
KING FERRY • NEWARK  
PENN YAN • PORT BYRON  
DUNDEE DENTAL CENTER

All part of Finger Lakes Community Health  
[www.localcommunityhealth.com](http://www.localcommunityhealth.com)



## MAIN STREET FAMILY HEALTH

Wayne Strouse, MD

**Welcoming  
New Patients!**

-- On vacation and need a doctor?  
-- Tired of Large corporate medicine?

-- Need a second opinion?

-- Need a doctor who will work with your regular doctor in Florida?

**YOU ARE LOOKING FOR  
MAIN STREET FAMILY HEALTH!**

- Where we specialize in YOU
- Where everyone knows your name
- Where we provide Healthcare with a Heart

Call us, or better yet, come by  
and say “hi”  
and pick up a brochure.

**108 Kimball Ave., Penn Yan  
315-536-CARE (2273)**