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Harms from screening for life-threatening diseases

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Screening for life-threatening diseases has potential benefits but also inevitably unintended harms. These unintended harms and their consequences are underreported in scientific papers and in the media. Furthermore, the focus on information to potential screening participants is often sparse and misleading. This makes it difficult, not only for the health professionals but also for the individual citizen and the society to evaluate the benefits and harms of a screening programme properly.

in this symposium we will present different perspectives on the unintended harms of screening covering screening programmes for colorectal cancer (CRC), breast cancer (BC), abdominal aorta aneurysms (AAA) and cervical cancer (CC) in five short presentations:

1. A discussion of how sparse information of the harms from screening is in the medical literature and in the different forms of communication with patients (doctor consultations, leaflets and websites).
2. The development of a condition-specific questionnaire measuring psychosocial consequences of CRC screening will be presented, using data from group interviews with screening participants having a false-positive screening result and benign polyps.
3. The possible negative psychosocial consequences and the potential derived costs of CRC screening will be presented.
4. Estimates of overdiagnosis and overtreatment in AAA screening, based on data from previous randomised AAA screening trials will be discussed.
5. After implementation of the HPV vaccine, concern has been raised that vaccinated women will not attend CC screening; because they believe that they have full protection from the vaccine. Screening intentions and risk-perceptions among HPV-vaccinated and unvaccinated women will be presented from an ongoing survey.

Each presentation will be followed by a possibility for clarifying questions and discussion. The symposium will end with a discussion about the overall topic: harms from screening for life-threatening diseases.