

**Referral for further investigation of breast lump
18HDC00843, 19 June 2019**

*General practitioner ~ Medical centre ~ Mammography ~
Lump ~ Imaging ~ Referral ~ Right 4(1)*

A woman underwent routine screening mammography, with follow-up focused mammography and ultrasound a month later. The results of the additional mammographic views showed “benign very faint calcification in the 10 o’clock position of the right breast”, and the ultrasound was described as normal apart from some areas of fibrocystic change. The mammogram report indicated that there was no evidence of breast cancer.

Six months later, the woman presented to a general practitioner (GP) with pain and swelling in her right breast over the past two to three days, although the swelling had decreased by the time of the consultation. The GP examined the woman and found a 3cm cyst palpable in the right upper quadrant of the right breast.

The GP reviewed the woman’s notes and saw the report of her most recent mammogram. He was reassured that the palpable lump on examination was the same as the lesion described in the mammogram, as he felt that it was in the same position and was of the same nature. As her symptoms were also subsiding, the GP interpreted the symptoms as being due to a benign cyst with a degree of mastitis.

The GP explained to the woman that the same area had been noted and deemed not to be cancerous. He asked her to return for review if her symptoms worsened again. He did not refer her to a specialist as he assumed that the lump was benign.

Five months later, the woman was seen at the medical centre by another GP, with similar symptoms and concerns about the lump. The GP could see the outline of the lump, which was now harder and larger, through the woman’s shirt at the top of her right breast. He urgently referred her to a specialist. The woman was diagnosed with Stage 3 triple negative cancer of the right breast. The woman subsequently died.

Findings

The first GP was found to have breached Right 4(1) for failing to refer the woman for further imaging of her breast lesion in the circumstances.

The medical centre was not found vicariously liable for the GP’s breach of Right 4(1) of the Code.

Recommendations

It was recommended that the GP provide a written letter of apology to the woman’s family for the breach of the Code identified. It was also recommended that he provide HDC with evidence of his learnings and reflections from the Continuous Medical Education he has undertaken, and the ongoing e-learning he is undertaking, as well as any changes made to his practice as a result of this case.