

COVID-19 threatening vital Cancer screening



of the time these are not due to cancer either. Reassuringly over 95% of GP referrals for possible breast cancer turn out to be absolutely fine.

That doesn't mean that we are seeing people inappropriately. Explaining to someone that their symptoms are not due to cancer can be extremely rewarding, and so you must always report new changes. This also means that we have a better chance of picking up early breast cancers. Whilst it is undoubtedly a shock to be told you have breast cancer, the sooner it can be diagnosed, the more successful treatment is likely to be. ■

— *Mr Simon Marsh, Surgical Director, Breast Consultant Surgeon, 108 Harley Street London Breast Clinic*

THE DETAILS

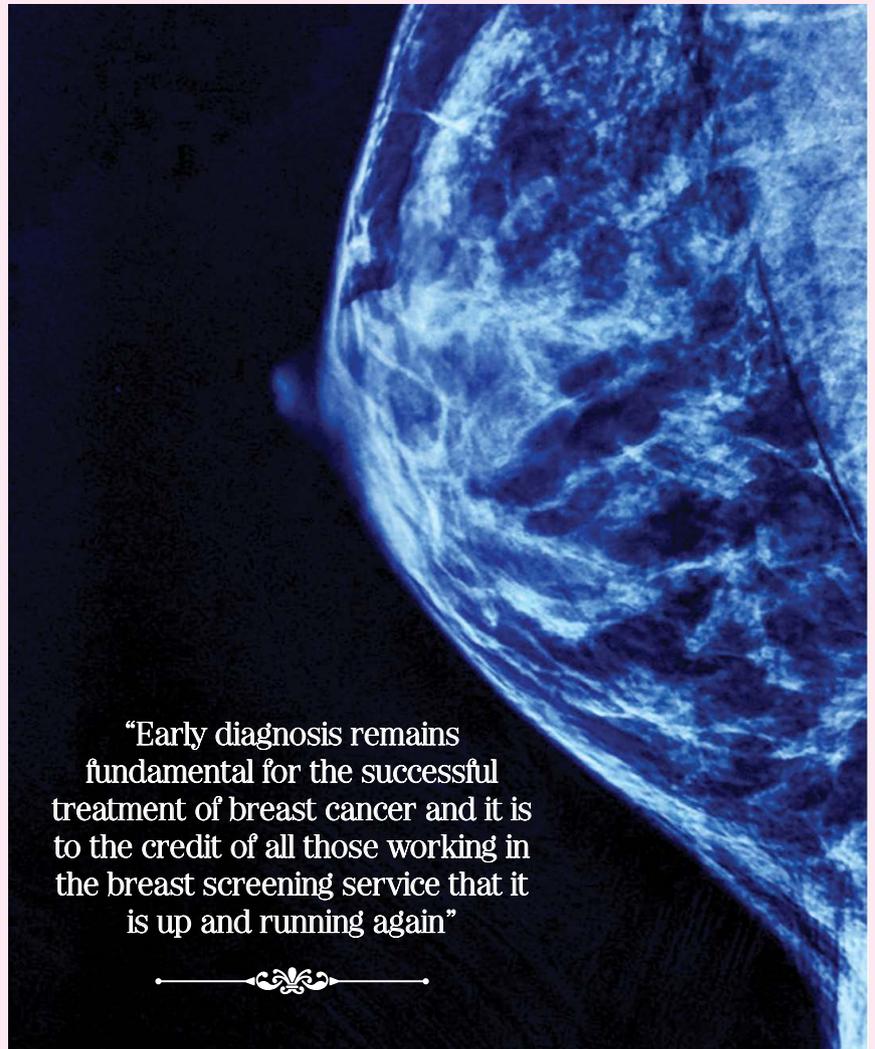
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The Covid 19 pandemic has had a huge effect on cancer services provided by the NHS. During the lockdown, many hospital appointments were delayed and “face to face” GP consultations were severely limited. Breast screening was suspended for several months. All this has led to concerns that some early cancers have been missed with the potential for tens of thousands of excess cancer deaths, with many hundreds attributable to a delayed breast cancer diagnosis.

Early diagnosis remains fundamental for the successful treatment of breast cancer and it is to the credit of all those working in the breast screening service that it is up and running again. More than half of breast cancers are detected this way (these are called “screen detected”, as opposed to those that women find themselves, called “symptomatic” cancers). Unfortunately, it is going to be some time before breast screening is back to normal, not only because there is a significant backlog to be cleared but also because social distancing requirements mean that the service cannot safely operate at the same level as before the pandemic.

So, it is even more important that you are aware of what is normal for you and make sure that you let your GP know about anything that is new, different or simply a bit odd. Most symptomatic cancers we see will appear as a lump, but most breast lumps are not cancer. Similarly, whilst some cancers may be associated with nipple changes (including nipple discharge), or skin changes, most



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