health.minister@novascotia.ca and premier@novascotia.ca ( please also send to MLA)

**Email subject line: Nova Scotians deserve a chance to find breast cancer early**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_,

I am writing today about breast cancer screening practices in our province that are causing harm and costing lives.

**Issue: Women with dense breasts cannot access essential supplementary screening**

Women in Nova Scotia with dense breasts are unable to access essential additional screening in the form of screening ultrasound, MRI or Contrast Enhanced Mammography. For women with dense breasts, mammograms are less accurate. Dense breast tissue is white on a mammogram, as is cancer. This creates a masking effect. The accuracy of mammography declines as the density increases - up to 40% of the cancers present in the densest breasts may be missed. Cancer in women with dense breasts is often discovered when a woman feels a lump after a ‘normal’ mammogram. These are called interval cancers and they are frequently later stage. Women with dense breasts are more likely to need mastectomy and chemotherapy and their prognosis is impacted. Additional screening can find many cancers in dense breasts that were missed by mammography. Nova Scotia has not made supplementary screening available to women with dense breasts.

**Reasons given for not providing women with dense breasts additional screening**

**Reason 1:** There is insufficient evidence to show additional screening reduces deaths.Mammography is the only screening test proven to reduce deaths due to breast cancer. However, mammography is the only modality studied in an RCT. No RCT has been completed on ultrasound or MRI. However, RCTs are happening and have already published results showing ultrasound and MRI find small, invasive, node-negative cancers in women with dense breasts that were missed on mammograms. It has been known since 1995 that additional screening can find cancers early. As well, it is time to consider the suffering endured by women with a needless late stage diagnosis. Women deserve a chance to avoid chemotherapy and mastectomy and lymphedema.

**Reason 2: False Alarms from screening tests**

Ultrasound and MRI find abnormalities that ultimately prove to be benign. The need for further testing causes anxiety for women. However, anxiety is not a reason to deny women ultrasound. It is paternalistic and patronizing to the women of Nova Scotia, who can make their own choices! Women state that the transient stress of a false alarm is far less than the stress of being denied the opportunity for early detection and finding later-stage cancer.

**Patient access to screening ultrasound and MRI in Canada**

- British Columbia: Screening ultrasound is available for women in Category C and D

- Ontario: Women with Category D can request screening ultrasound annually or MRI every two years. Ultrasound is available for Category C.

- Alberta and NWT: Screening ultrasound is offered to women in Category C and D

- Quebec: Screening ultrasound is offered by the screening program to women in Category D with a family history

- PEI: Commitment by Premier for the screening program to offer ultrasound for women in Category D

- Other provinces: Screening ultrasound is available on a case-by-case basis

**Patient access to screening ultrasound and MRI in Nova Scotia**

None.

Only women deemed high risk (over 25% lifetime risk can access MRI)

**Cost effectiveness: Finding cancer early saves money.** Stage 1 average cost of treatment is 39,000, Stage 4 average cost is 371,000

**What the Government of Nova Scotia must do**

The government must ensure that screening ultrasound or MRI is accessible so that women in Nova Scotia have a chance to find breast cancer early! It’s time to stop the needless deaths and suffering.

Sincerely,

[Name]

Riding