health.minister@novascotia.ca

**Email subject line: Call to Change Outdated Breast Screening Practices**

Dear Minister Cher,

I am writing to you today about breast cancer screening practices in our province that are costing lives.

**Background**

On October 29, 2019, Nova Scotia became the second province to implement breast density notification. The government recognized that women were being put at risk of a delayed breast cancer diagnosis because they were not being given information about a breast cancer risk affecting them: dense breasts. Now women are learning if they are at increased risk and can be proactive.

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

Although women in Nova Scotia are now told if they have dense breasts, they are unable to access beneficial additional screening in the form of screening ultrasound. 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 50% 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. Screening ultrasound can find many cancers in dense breasts that were missed by mammography. Nova Scotia has not made supplementary screening ultrasound available to women with dense breasts.

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

**Reason 1:** There is insufficient evidence to show ultrasound 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 ever been completed on ultrasound. It has been known since 1995 when the Journal *Cancer* published the first paper that ultrasound detects small, invasive, node-negative cancers in women with dense breasts that were missed on mammograms.

**Reason 2: False Alarms**

Ultrasounds 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 in Canada and elsewhere in the world**

* British Columbia: Screening ultrasound is available for women in Category C and D
* Alberta: 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
* USA: Screening ultrasound is paid for by insurance in a number of states
* Western Australia, France, Australia: Screening ultrasound is offered by the screening programs to women in Category C and D.

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

None

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

The government must ensure that screening ultrasound is accessible so that women in Nova Scotia who have dense breasts have a chance to make a choice whether or not they want to access ultrasound. Finding breast cancer early should not depend on where we live!

Sincerely,

[Name]