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New civilian guidelines committee urges forward, after 2024 breast cancer screening debacle

The methodology has to be reliable," says new committee chair Dr. Jennifer Ellison, a family physician and a professor in the department of Family Medicine at Dalhousie University.

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Staff Writer

The Chair of the new National Advisory Committee on Preventive Health Guidelines, Dr. Jennifer Ellison, guides a session of discussion on refreshing the guidelines, at the committee's first meeting, at which it was decided which health conditions it will study in coming months. Photo courtesy of Dr. Jennifer Ellison and Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Sport

The new advisory committee, which Health Minister Mark Holland announced last week, will replace the Task Force for Preventive Health Guidelines, which was disbanded after the 2024 breast cancer screening controversy, and which had been criticized for its lengthy timelines, and for its recommendation of 30 and over as the recommended by many cancer groups.

Canada's productivity gap is harmed in part because Canadians are less healthy than people in other countries, Dr. Jennifer Ellison, chair of the new National Advisory Committee on Preventive Health Guidelines, told a session of the committee, at its first meeting, last week. Photo courtesy of Dr. Jennifer Ellison and Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Sport

Dr. Jennifer Ellison, chair of the new National Advisory Committee on Preventive Health Guidelines, at the committee's first meeting, last week, at which it was decided which health conditions it will study in coming months. Photo courtesy of Dr. Jennifer Ellison and Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Sport

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On the cover of the 2024 breast cancer guidelines, a woman's breast. The 2024 task force said it "generally doesn't refer to them in its own medical guidelines," but it did include breast cancer screening in its guidelines, for the first time.

Michael Collins, vice-president of PHAC's Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention Branch and the 2024 guidelines "have no official status, they are just a report," he said, at the committee's first meeting.

Collins, who took part in the criticized internal review of the 2024 guidelines, said the report, which includes a six-month long review, was left to no longer focused and, after it was being updated, not mentioned.

The committee's first meeting, last week, was spent reviewing updated guidelines for screening for breast cancer, which "generally" recommended screening at 50 and over, for women, in 2024.

The Canadian Cancer Society also requested a review of the guidelines, which had been in the process working on updated guidelines for cervical cancer, which "they expected to be released in 2014.

The cancer society's request was studied more than 10 years, the method of testing for the disease in Canada, "has changed," she said.

Jennie Dale, founder and executive director of Breast Cancer Canada, said she's calling for a "fresh look" for updated breast cancer guidelines.

Saying that she's called for PHAC to "dissolve the previous task force's methodology" should be avoided, Dale said, "I don't think it's helpful to have a process that's "pretty broad process," its work to develop guidelines should be based on "what's most suited to consult relevant individuals and groups."

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The review calls on PHAC to recommend a new task force be established, "with a mandate to develop a new set of guidelines." It also calls for "a process to develop a dedicated or shared secretariat to provide administrative support to the committee."

"The committee does its work, I am going to say, independently," she said.

"We just don't have the bandwidth or the equity, the resources to do the work, the reviews, and the provide recommendations to the Public Health Agency of Canada, and to the minister, and to the public, and to the public, and to the people that do the recommendations," Collins said.

Dr. Jennifer Ellison, chair of the new committee, said it is the committee's budget be doubled to fifty million per year.

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A follow-up email from PHAC to The Hill Times said, "Budgetary considerations are "a factor," PHAC which may be adjusted following the Ministerial review and consultation process."

The external review, which did not recommend any changes to the process, noted that it has been seven years without a dedicated budget.

A separate evaluation of the task force, published in 2022, said the task force had "limited" budget, "which was insufficient to cover the cost of the work." It was based in the United Kingdom exercised US Preventive Services Task Force, Canada's Task Force and the American equivalent is typically funded by a budget of $ 50 million, and recommendations, "are not."

Dale said the Canadian Cancer Society's request, is that the committee's budget be doubled to fifty million per year.

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