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For Immediate Release

Women: What's your breast cancer risk?
Education, coupled with breakthrough technology, can lead to saved lives

Plainview, NY, February 2010 — Just learning you're at risk for breast cancer can help increase your chance of survival. That's why health experts like pathologist Olga Falkowski, MD, encourage women as young as 18 to educate themselves about sophisticated new diagnostic options that, in some cases, can detect a woman's breast cancer risk as many as eight years before a lesion can be seen or felt.

"For the majority of women, a baseline mammogram at 40, and then annual mammograms is often the best option. But those with high risk factors for the disease should talk with their doctor about new tools that can identify potentially dangerous cells years before an actual tumor forms," said Dr. Falkowski, associate medical director of Acupath Laboratories, Inc., which offers the most sophisticated technologies available for cell and genetic analyses.

According to statistical analysis of the American Cancer Society, breast cancer is the leading cause of death in women 20 to 59 years old and the second most commonly diagnosed cancer in women. U.S. Centers for Disease Control statistics show that in 2009, more than 40,000 women died from the disease.

Although a woman's overall risk of developing breast cancer increases as she gets older, individual risk factors can come into play at any age. These include:

- Family history of breast cancer.
- Oral contraceptive use.
- Early start of menstruation (before age 12) or late start of menopause (after age 55).
- Race. While Caucasians are more likely to develop the disease, African-Americans are more likely to have aggressive tumors and die from it.
- Smoking, obesity, physical inactivity and eating a diet high in fat and red meat can also put a woman at greater risk.

"The best approach for any woman to identify her breast cancer risk is to speak with her doctor. Women should ask: 'What diagnostic and screening tools are right for me?' and 'When should I start using them?'"

Many medical laboratories are capable of examining cells for the presence of BRCA1 and BRCA2 breast cancer genes. Acupath Laboratories also has the technology to detect HER-2/neu gene, which is associated with aggressive form of breast cancer.

Acupath became one of the first laboratories in the United States to offer HALO, a recently developed Breast Pap Test. Similar to the Pap test for cervical cancer, this simple exam uses fluid gently aspirated from the nipples to determine the presence of abnormal cells that puts a woman at greater breast cancer risk. Studies show women with atypical milk duct cells to be as much as five times more likely to develop breast cancer. This test has the ability to identify these cells up to eight years before any signs of cancer.

“This test is new. But it’s also a test that women—especially young women—should talk with their doctors about and consider,” Dr. Falkowski said. “This test gives women with abnormal results the opportunity to stay on alert and take needed interventions early—before cancer or a tumor has even formed.”

Other, more well-known breast cancer screening and diagnostic tools include:

- Mammogram. Digital mammography, which offers a more detailed, high-resolution image than traditional X-rays, has become the gold standard, particularly for women over 40 with dense breast tissues or a family history of the disease.
- Ultrasound. While this increasingly-popular screening cannot detect the small calcifications that can appear in breast cancer’s earliest stages, it can effectively identify whether a mass is a solid, potentially cancerous tumor or a non-cancerous, fluid-filled cyst.
- Fine needle aspiration, which is performed after a suspicious lump or lesion is discovered. A thin needle is used to take a tiny tissue sample from around the areola or nipples. The tissue is then examined by a specially trained pathologist like those at Acupath. “This is a very effective way to identify diseased cells in their earliest stages, when survival rates are highest,” Dr. Falkowski explained.
- Surgical biopsy. During what is generally a minimally invasive, outpatient procedure, a surgeon takes a small tissue sample from in and around a suspected tumor or lesion. A pathologist examines it.

Dr. Falkowski adds that women need to remember to be their own best advocates: “Breast education, is of critical importance. Every woman needs to be aware of what is normal and not for her own body—and immediately follow up with her physician when anything unusual or uncomfortable occurs.”

Olga Falkowski, M.D. is Board-certified in anatomic and clinical pathology by the American Board of Pathology, and serves as the Unit Chief of Breast Pathology and the Associate Medical Director of Acupath Laboratories, Inc. www.acupath.com

Acupath Laboratories, Inc. is a Plainview, New York, specialty medical lab engaged in leading-edge molecular and cytogenetic analysis. www.acupath.com