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Women's experiences of mammography - a qualitative study with breast screening clients and staff

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Background: Mammography is often painful and unpleasant, but effective interventions to improve the experience remain scarce. Surprisingly little qualitative investigation of the topic has been conducted in the UK and no published study has included heterogeneous samples of both clients and mammography staff from the NHS breast screening programme. We aimed to achieve a thorough, contemporary understanding of experiences of screening mammography by exploring the perspectives of the women who participate and the radiography staff who perform the examinations (mammographers).

Methods: We conducted semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews and thematic data analysis. Clients and mammographers were recruited from three NHS breast screening centres in London and Scotland.

Results: Clients had positive attitudes to breast screening but mostly low knowledge about potential harms of screening. Any dissatisfaction with levels of knowledge or information concerned the mammography procedure rather than screening effectiveness. The mammographer data indicated that some women attend for breast screening under pressure from others.

Pain and coping with it were prominent themes. Regarding communication, clients placed more importance on the mammographer's manner than on what was said, and recognised differences in mammographers' abilities to put them at ease. For mammographers, empowering clients within the confines of a taxing technique and maintaining compassionate care when faced with challenging client behaviours were causes of strain.

Conclusions: Future intervention development should focus on the information and support needs of women prior to the mammography appointment and on effectively training and supporting mammographers to deal with emotionally charged situations.