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By Sue Dunlevy 22 February 2020

Tussle over cancer test

Rejection angers support group

A \$5000 test that can indicate whether a breast cancer patient needs chemotherapy has been rejected for a government subsidy, even though it would mean thousands of women could avoid the harrowing treatment.

The government's Medical Services Advisory Committee said there was not enough evidence to support a Medicare rebate for the test.

Breast cancer support groups are furious with the decision, which has also shocked at least one US expert.

"I think it's a mistake," Boston's Dana-Farber Institute expert Dr Eric Winer said. In the US, all insurers paid for the genetic test for women with HER2-positive breast cancer when the cancer had not spread to the patient's lymph nodes, he said.

The Oncotype DX test analyses 21 genes from a breast tumour and can help predict the risk that cancer may recur and the likely benefit chemotherapy may have in reducing that risk.

The test, performed in a single lab in the US, has not been approved by authorities such as the US Food and Drug Administration, nor by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration.

Specialised Therapeutics Australia Pty Ltd applied for had public funding of the

Oncotype DX test in Australia but was rejected this week.

MSAC advised that the evidence “did not give the committee confidence that the test would identify those patients who could safely avoid chemotherapy”.

Breast Cancer Network Australia was disappointed the test had been rejected. “If we can identify those people who will benefit from not having chemotherapy, it is essential that we save them from over-treatment,” CEO Kirsten Pilatti said, adding chemotherapy has significant long-term impacts on patients’ health.

Kari Svensen (pictured) was able to afford the genetic test when diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago. The now 73-year-old from St Ives said it found she didn’t need chemotherapy and instead she underwent radiation treatment — and is still cancer-free.

“I fervently wish this test was available to all Australian women,” she said.