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MEDIA RELEASE

October 22, 2010

For Immediate Release

Province unites to fight breast cancer before it starts *New Provincial Breast Health Strategy unveiled*

Vancouver – A comprehensive new Provincial Breast Health Strategy announced today will provide more timely, equitable access to screening, diagnostic and prevention services in order to increase breast cancer survival rates, and fight the most common form of cancer diagnosed in Canadian women.

“The Provincial Breast Health Strategy marks the first time that government, health authorities, and key community partners have joined forces to fight breast cancer, and demonstrates our commitment to improving the health of women,” said Minister of Health Services Kevin Falcon. “Over the past four years, the province has increased spending on screening mammography by \$5.48 million, and almost doubled the overall budget for B.C.’s Screening Mammography Program since 2001 to \$23.5 million. This new provincial strategy will enable us to do even more and make tangible improvements to breast cancer care.”

While B.C. has the lowest incidence of breast cancer in the country and the best survival outcomes for women who do get breast cancer, Minister Falcon reinforced the commitment to still do more. In 2009 alone, 2,800 B.C. women found out that they had breast cancer, and 650 families lost loved ones as a result. The impact is devastating and experts across the province are uniting in their belief that a proactive focus on consistent screening, diagnostic, and prevention can make a difference.

The Provincial Breast Health Strategy is led by the Ministry of Health Services and the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA). Project partners include the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, B.C.’s regional health authorities, the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society, and the BC Radiological Society. The initiative is co-chaired by BC Cancer Agency President Dr. David Levy and BC Women’s Hospital & Health Centre President Dr. Jan Christilaw.

Representatives from these partner agencies include frontline care providers and policy makers from throughout B.C.’s healthcare system, as well as representatives from community groups with a special interest in breast cancer services.

“One of the most important aspects of cancer control is looking at areas where changes need to be made,” said Dr. David Levy, who also co-chairs the project’s Clinical Pathway Improvement Team. “With the Provincial Breast Health Strategy, we have a unique opportunity to make an impact on breast cancer by ensuring that we give B.C. women access to the most up-to-date and appropriate screening and diagnostic resources, regardless of where they live.”

The focus of Dr. Levy’s clinical pathway team is creating the standards, measures, and provincial framework to help ensure that all B.C. women have timely access to appropriate diagnostic services after an abnormal mammogram result.

Other teams are working on:

- Ways to increase the number of eligible women participating in the Screening Mammography Program of BC, including increasing screening rates in B.C.'s "hard to reach" populations;
- Clarifying B.C.'s mammography screening policy to help women and their doctors make informed decisions about when to begin screening;
- New initiatives to ensure that B.C. continues to have the specialized healthcare professionals required for screening and diagnostic services, including the creation of fellowships for radiologists interested in breast imaging;
- Developing a plan and business case to implement digital screening mammography technology across the province by 2013; and
- Implementing a new, collaborative approach to breast cancer prevention that can be integrated with other provincial strategies.

These approaches will build on the excellent work already done that has helped drive provincial breast cancer rates down to the lowest in Canada. B.C. women have already benefited from a \$5 million investment in Rapid Access Clinics, which identified new breast practices and significantly reduced the wait time from referral to diagnosis after abnormal screening results.

The prior investments and lessons learned will contribute to the Provincial Breast Health Strategy, the development of a strong clinical pathway, and consistent standards of care. This will ensure that women receive high quality diagnostic services in a timely manner, no matter where they live in B.C. and provide for ongoing evaluation and coordination of services.

"If we can detect breast cancer as early as possible, women stand a much better chance of making a full recovery," said Dr. Christilaw. "We know that we need to help women and their family doctors or other primary caregivers get a much better understanding of when screening mammography is needed, as well as how to access the most appropriate diagnostic services after an abnormal screening mammography."

The value of that knowledge is no more evident than in the case of breast cancer survivor and Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation volunteer Margaret Hobson. Hobson, now 68 and a member of the Abreast in a Boat dragon boat team, found out that she had early breast cancer following a routine screening mammogram 12 years ago.

"I consider myself very fortunate that I was able to get regular mammograms," she said. "I was lucky that the cancer was caught early and am still living, breathing and doing well."

Based on her experience, Hobson urges other women to get regular mammograms in order to save lives.

The Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) plans, manages and evaluates selected specialty and province-wide health care services across BC, working with the five geographic health authorities to deliver province-wide solutions that improve the health of British Columbians. For more information, please visit www.phsa.ca.