

## Tracking an Outbreak U.S. Response

## DELAYED SCREENINGS

## Advanced Cancers Are Emerging, Doctors Warn, Citing D

By REED ABELSON

Yvette Lowery usually gets her annual mammogram around March. But last year, just as the pandemic was gaining a foothold and medical facilities were shutting down, the center where she goes canceled her appointment. No one could tell her when to reschedule.

"They just said keep calling back, keep calling back," said Ms. Lowery, 59, who lives in Rock Hill, S.C.

In August, Ms. Lowery felt a lump under her arm but still couldn't get an appointment until October.

Eventually, she received a diagnosis of Stage 2 breast cancer, started chemotherapy in November and had a double mastectomy this month.

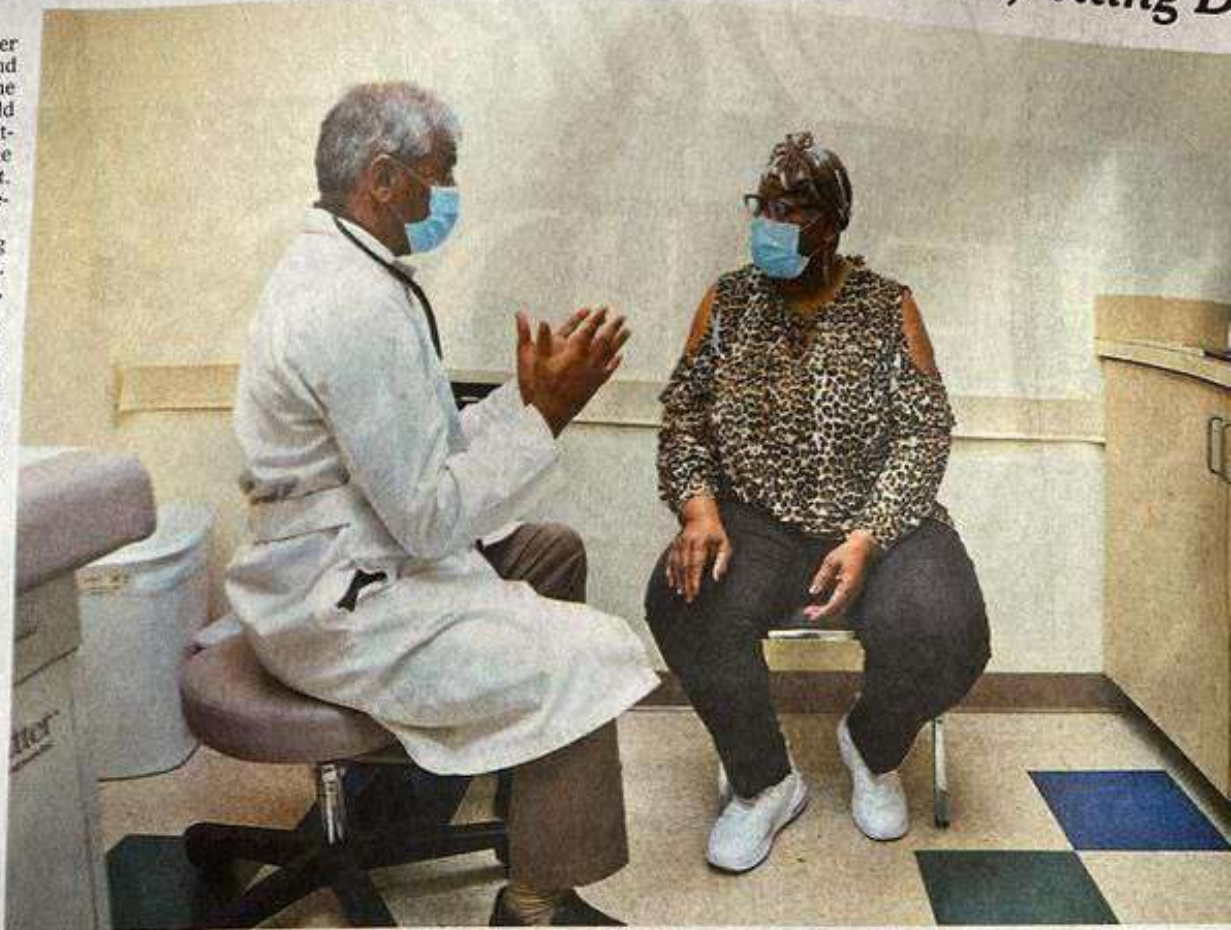
"I've been seeing a lot of patients at an advanced stage," said Dr. Kashyap B. Patel, one of Ms. Lowery's doctors and the chief executive of Carolina Blood and Cancer Care Associates. If her cancer had been detected last May or June, it would have probably been caught before it had spread, Dr. Patel said.

Months of lockdowns and waves of surging Covid cases throughout last year shuttered clinics and testing labs, or reduced hours at other places, resulting in steep declines in the number of screenings, including for breast and colorectal cancers, experts have said.

Numerous studies showed that the number of patients screened or given a diagnosis of cancer fell during the early months of the pandemic. By mid-June, the rate of screenings for breast, colon and cervical cancers were still 29 percent to 36 percent lower than their prepandemic levels, according to an analysis of data by the Epic Health Research Network. Hundreds of thousands fewer screenings were performed last year than in 2019, according to the network data.

"We still haven't caught up," said Dr. Chris Mast, vice president of clinical informatics for Epic, which develops electronic health records for hospitals and clinics.

Another analysis of Medicare data suggested that as Covid cases spiked during certain periods in 2020, cancer screenings fell. The analysis — conducted by Avalere Health, a consulting firm, or Community Oncology Alliance



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colorectal cancer," said Dr. Lucio N. Gordan, the president of the Florida Cancer Specialists & Research Institute, one of the nation's largest independent oncology groups. He is working on a study to see if, over all, these missed screenings resulted in more patients with later-stage

"The fear of Covid was more tangible than the fear of missing a screen that detected cancer," said Dr. Patrick I. Borgen, the chair of surgery at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn who also leads its breast center. His hospital treated such large numbers of coronavirus patients early on that "we're now associated as the

The pandemic affected the ability of Yvette Lowery, her doctor, Kashyap B. Patel, and Sandy Prieto, in part to get timely cancer diagnoses. Ms. Prieto died in S

When she went to see her doctor, she had advanced cancer. "It's just a devastating story," Dr. Salani said. "Screening tests are really designed when patients aren't feeling bad."

Ryan Bellamy felt no hurry last spring to reschedule a canceled colonoscopy, even though the presence of blood in his stool had prompted him to look up symptoms. "I really didn't want to go to the hospital," Mr. Bellamy said. He decided it was unlikely he had cancer. "They're not following up with me so I'm OK with Googling," he told himself.

A resident of Palm Coast, Fla., Mr. Bellamy said that after his symptoms worsened, his wife insisted that he go for testing in December, and he had a colonoscopy in late January. With a new diagnosis of Stage 3 rectal cancer, Mr. Bellamy, 38, is undergoing radiation treatment and chemotherapy.

spot on his lung, I posed to follow up pandemic hit. "Add and care was deferred," said. By the time fully evaluated, t creased in size. thing to wait 10 day said, although whether earlier have changed th

Just as previous sessions led people care, the doctor during the discouraged m seeking help or

"We know there," said Dr. neny, the chief Mexico Onc Consultants. M are staying a have insurance not afford the payments. "W particularly w