

## **Treatment of elderly patients**

Breast cancer in the elderly may be as aggressive as that found in younger women and since about 40% of all breast cancers occur in patients over 70 (who could have an average life expectancy of 14 years), treatment must be as equally effective as that used in younger patients. For patients unable to tolerate general anaesthesia, surgery such as wide local excision and even mastectomy can be undertaken using local anaesthesia and sedation. Furthermore, radiotherapy treatment is well tolerated by this age group and may be radical.

It is a feature of tumours in elderly patients that a larger proportion are oestrogen/progesterone receptor rich and hence a larger proportion will benefit from endocrine treatment. The oestrogen receptor status of the tumour should be assessed on the cytology specimens prior to starting treatment. However, the only patients who may receive tamoxifen, as sole primary therapy, are the small number of very elderly and infirm patients who are unfit for other treatments (or do not want surgery) and who are oestrogen receptor positive (ER +ve).