

I'm Dying of Easy Accessibility

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Some have said that the two basic human emotions are horniness and guilt. While I don't deny the importance of these traits in the general population (especially horniness), they are by no means the most common impulses that drive people. In my opinion, the basic pastime of our species consists of complaining, griping, and bitching. Now it's my turn. Allow me a tirade.

Did you ever wonder why we have to be so damn available to everyone? Telephones in our homes and offices, cordless phones in our backyards and cars, beepers, fax machines, and E-mail. It's enough to give you a stroke. I swear that if Alexander Graham Bell walked into my office, I'd punch him in the nose. If he called, you can be sure that I would put him on hold.

Albert Einstein said that the reason we are here on earth is for each other, but I don't think he envisioned how technology would erode our privacy. In the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, one of the most memorable lines is "What we have here is a failure to communicate." Horsefeathers! What we have is an overload, a plethora, a supersaturation of communication. I'm dying of easy accessibility.

I know I'm dating myself (as a colleague said, "Who else would date you?"), but I remember the days when there were signs outside our medical institutions that said "Hospital Zone—Quiet Please." On rare urgent occasions, a velvety voice flowed from the public address system, requesting that a specific physician contact the nursing station. The wards were chock full of patients, and a simple communication system was available to facilitate medical care. This system consisted of "flash boxes" that were placed in the hallways and conference rooms. The residents and staff physicians were assigned numbers that were flashed on these boxes whenever they were needed. Nowadays, both the flash boxes and the quiet zones have disappeared. In their place is a cacophony of beepers, monitors, and other noises that make hospitals sound like a warm-up act for a heavy metal rock band.

Well, perhaps I'm guilty of just a touch of hyperbole. Maybe my number flashed away unseen for 30 minutes while a patient complained of substernal chest pain. Maybe I'd get there quicker with today's high-tech approach to summoning physicians. But then again, maybe

my number flashed because I was being called to countersign a cathartic order written by a medical student.

Beepers burst onto the medical scene almost 20 years ago. The early models let out a sound so shrill that any dog within a 2-mile radius began howling like a 50-year-old with renal colic. The individual being paged (the beeper?) would pick up the nearest phone and call the operator for the message. Once doctors learned that calls could just as easily be from a used car salesman as a sick patient, beepers began to be "inadvertently" misplaced or lost.

A recent improvement in technology is the vibrating pager. This device has definitely lowered the decibel levels in hospitals. The vibrator creates an unusual sensation, especially if suspended from a belt and nestled in the groin area when in a sitting position. I was driving at excessive speeds on the freeway the first time my vibrator was activated. Fortunately, there was little traffic so my 360° spin was harmless, albeit interesting. Perhaps these pagers should come with the following disclaimer—*Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that improper use of this device may be hazardous to your health.*

Some time ago, I took a vacation with the primary purpose of becoming inaccessible for a week. No beeper, no E-mail, and no fax machines—only a phone at the lodge one-half mile away, with a number known only to God and my secretary. After 2 days of silent serenity, disaster struck! I was told I was wanted on the phone. What could it be? Did my house burn down? Was my unmarried daughter pregnant? Had my son decided to go to law school? With each step toward the lodge, a newly envisioned but greater crisis arose in my mind. Had our new managed care program managed to dispose of me? Was our new dean a chiropractor? Did the new congressional health care plan exclude endocrinologists (my specialty) as providers? By the time I reached the lodge, I had considered every ominous possibility short of the Apocalypse.

My tremulous hello was answered by an occasional patient of mine, who was in the hospital about to have a surgical procedure—a penile implant. (I learned later that the patient had obtained the phone number from the Almighty.) Poor Peter (an unfortunate name under the circumstances) was unsure about the wisdom of the procedure. "I'm having a hard time" he said, somewhat incongruously, "deciding about the surgery." He needed reassurance, which I happily gave him. He was relieved, and so was I. On my next vacation, there will be no lodge and no phone, so I will probably get telegrams. I truly am dying of easy accessibility.

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