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# FROM THE SOFT EDGES

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## Recumbent Night Calls — Chris Ellis

In 1932 my father bought the single handed general practice in the village of Shirehampton in Gloucestershire. It was owned by a Doctor Faulkner who had become too old to carry on auscultating and who wanted to move to the seaside and hang up his stethoscope. My mother and father moved into the old double-storeyed doctor's house that stood at the bottom of the village green. It was rather a drab grey walled house standing in a terrace right on the pavement.

About two weeks after they had settled in, they were asleep in the upstairs bedroom when my mother was awakened by a voice in the room. It was pitch black. "Doctor, doctor, are you there?" the voice urgently pleaded. Alarmed, she called out to my father who was deeply asleep next to her. The bedroom was now silent and no movement was heard. Then suddenly the voice spoke again, "Doctor, doctor, are you there?". My mother, who was at that time a young bride, clutched the bedclothes to her and my father leapt out of the bed and switched the light on. There was no one in the room. They looked under the bed only to be confronted with the potty. Then again the voice spoke to them, this time louder and more insistently. By this time they were as alert as two ferrets at a rabbit hunt, when suddenly they saw the rabbit hole. The voice was coming from a speaking tube just behind the bed.

Unbeknown to them, this speaking tube lead from beside the main door down at the street up to the main bedroom. The villagers all knew that to get the doctor at night, you walked to the house, took the cork bung out of the tube next to the doorbell and gave a bellow. No modern answering

service could possibly have bypassed such an arrangement. My parents later learnt that the villagers hardly ever used the tube because the elderly Doctor Faulkner was known to send down some pithy nocturnal replies.

Now this tube has given me an idea for the design of the ideal general practitioner's house. This new design will mean that I will never have to get up for another night call again.

I ask you to imagine my next night call.

The telephone rings (ever so softly) beside my bed. I roll over with languid confidence, answer the phone and ask the patient to drive over to my house. As their car approaches my home, the automatic gates open and the outside lights come on. The driveway has been laid out so that they drive up alongside the bedroom rather like an AutoBank, but this is the AutoGP.

I now press buttons on my bedside console which houses an electronic computer. The automatic curtains open for me to observe them through the one-way bedroom window. I then speak to them through the speaking tube. There is a small cubicle where the patient undresses. A bed is in position outside, alongside the bedroom wall. The patient is instructed to lie down. I have a stethoscope that hangs up on the headboard of the bed, with a very long piece of tubing that goes through a hole drilled in the wall to the outside. The patient is instructed to pick up the headpiece and apply it to which ever part of the anatomy is appropriate. I give instructions through the speaking tube to breathe in and out while I listen through the stethoscope tubes. I am still lying in

my bed. The patient now opens his mouth and I switch on the outside spotlight which is controlled from the bedside panel. It illuminates the pharynx which is viewed through the window via a mirror. And so the examination continues.

Several other automatic instruments are available for other examinations but I have not perfected them yet. The design of the AutoGP will need some more thought, as I expect teething problems, especially with maternity cases etc. I also anticipate some complaints from our neighbours about nocturnal nudity and the patients might cool to the idea on a winter's night. Nevertheless I'm sure these can be overcome.

The consultation will end when I phone the all night chemist and give them a prescription that is to be collected. They then drive off out of the gates. As the gates close, the bedside computer automatically triggers the electric teapot beside the bed. After a hard night call, I find one needs a bit of refreshment.

*Copies of "The Soft Edges of Family Practice" are out of print. Limited stock available from Dr C G Ellis, P O Box 67, Cullinan, 1000. R45,00 includes postage and package.*