



Consultus Interruptus

Chris Ellis

An acquaintance of mine, who is now a psychiatrist, left general practice because it was “a life of continual interruptions”. I hope he found peace. To do so he would have had to remove two things, people and telephones. It is a sad fact that there are few of us around who can control our working environments. Even as I type this I can hear it ringing in the hall. I have just returned — it was a wrong number. Now where was I. We were on the subject of interruptions. It boils down to a balance between availability and being pestered into paranoid telephonic tinnitus. If you don’t take the calls you are not accessible and then you don’t save time sorting out the minor from the major problems and if you do take them your day is ‘a life of continual interruptions’.

The answer lies in that jewel of mankind (actually womankind) the receptionist who knows the practice population and their foibles. It depends on the quality of the receptionist/patient relationship and its continuity. It also depends on the receptionist/doctor relationship as well. She knows her doctors and what calls they will take. This ranges from none at all (the touchy one) to the one who takes all (the benevolent society). Even so, receptionists are human. I have heard them say some startling things down the phone. If the other two phones are ringing and one is on the first day of endometrial fallout, then a certain tension can build up.

My problem is that I find it impossible to leave a ringing phone unanswered. It normally starts just three seconds before I am about to take the Papanicolau smear. I find myself holding the phone in one gloved hand and an Ayres spatula held aloft in the other while the speculumed patient awaited, impaled on the bed. This is what I have called consultus interruptus.

It seems to me that this sort of thing now goes on all day. I just start doing something or talking to someone and there is a tapping on the door or the intercom goes. I have become so sensitised to the intercom that I’m sure it has startled me out of sinus rhythm. After the first few calls of the day I begin to identify with a poem written

by AN Jackson, a country general practitioner, who worked in the West of England:

*A million silly questions
Come every day unsought
By phone, by post, in surgery
Or on the road from A to B.
Always pursued by somebody
I’m catechised when caught
A million silly questions
(Guessed to the nearest nought)
I wonder if – as well I may
I give, in my abstracted way
A million silly answers eh?
H’m, formidable thought.*

I have now convinced myself that there is no escape from communication. Apparently I *must* communicate meaningfully with everyone. To allow me to do this the practice phone has multiplied by meiosis into satellite lesions called beepers that sleep in pockets, coats or golf bags. Even if you get out of range from them they leave messages with censoring innuendoes in them to let you know that you have sinned. They are written on paper with headings like “While you were out” and “Things I must do today”. Even at home there is no escape from the messages. I returned late one night to find a little message beside the phone written in irregular black crayon by my youngest son. “The Hospittle wrang” was a moist reminder of my absence.

There is another problem at home and that is there is a bird in the garden that sounds exactly

From the Soft Edges of Family Practice

like the ring of the phone. I don't know whether it is a parrot that has decided to torment me or whether it is the natural call of a local species. I am informed by experts that it is the latter. The only way I can tell the difference is that the bird has to take a breath after three rings. All this is now getting a bit much. My doctor/telephone relationship is in a very sensitive and labile state. If it rings at night I have two completely opposite responses depending on my level of sleep. One occurs when I have only just gone under. Before the first ring has finished my head has come off the pillow so fast I get telephone whiplash. The other and commoner is when I'm in third stage pinotage anaesthesia.

There is a fair amount of fumbling and monosyllabic grunting before I drop the phone for the first time. Thereinafter follows a question and answer period in which I apparently repeat back the exact questions I have just been asked.

A doctor who rang for advice one night likened it (rather unkindly I thought) to conversing with a constipated owl.

I take great strength though from an old partner and dear friend who also suffered from paranoid telephonic tinnitus. He returned home after a particularly trying day and laid a hammer beside the instrument that had interrupted him since dawn. Sure enough it almost immediately burst into song. He thereupon delivered some blows that are normally only seen in an orthopaedic theatre. Its carapace broke and the thin yellow, green and blue vessels eviscerated until its cardiovascular system came to a standstill. Even from here I can hear you applauding. There was silence at last.

There's one thing I've wondered about ever since and that is how he explained to the post office how the thing got into such a state.

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