Auscultations

A do-it-yourself stereophonic stethoscope

Years ago, I built a simple little listening tool. It seemed to me that we always listen to lungs from just 1 angle — the single, small end of a stethoscope. But why could we not listen from 2 ends, 2 angles? So, I fumbled around and put together a stereophonic auscultation instrument. I soon found it useful for examining little children because, like most other doctors and me, children love new gimmicks. Follow these easy instructions to assemble and use your own stereophonic stethoscope:

1. If you have 2 old binaural stethoscopes lying about, pull or cut them apart as shown in Figure 1. Retaining the top part (the part with the spring fixture) of 1 of the stethoscopes, run 1 tube with its own chest piece separately through each of the ear pieces as shown in Figure 2. Presto! You now have 1 stereophonic stethoscope.
2. Listen simultaneously to the front and back of any patient's chest. While listening, you may close your eyes, but obviously you must use both hands to "drive" the stethoscope. You will hear a 3-dimensional symphony of lung sounds that will entertain you, if not actually augment your clinical diagnostic acuity. But I think the stereophonic stethoscope will do the latter too.

This tool is particularly useful when listening to the upper lobes of the lungs. It may help with carotid bruits: simply place 1 chest piece over the carotid bifurcation and hold the other chest piece toward the back of the neck. It is possible that, with all the fancy electronic tools that can be wielded only by superspecialists, we may not need such an old-fashioned gimmick. Regardless, this fully portable "something" may be of use to the generalist. The curious and conscientious family doctor, who still likes to do a half-decent physical before turning to ultrasonography or computed tomography, might want to try listening over different body regions. I've tried to hear and visualize the vascular goings-on inside my own head by placing one end over an eye socket with the other end back at the occiput. But no luck. Nothing going on.

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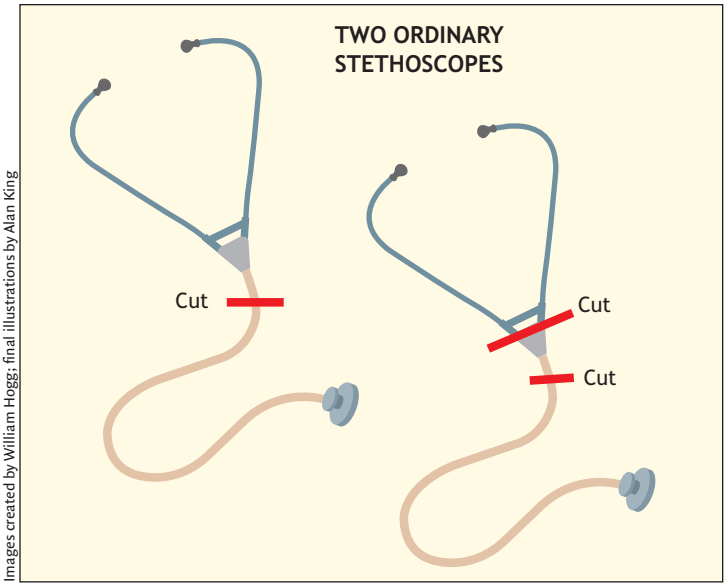

Images created by William Hogg; final illustrations by Alan King

Figure 1: Cut or pull apart 2 ordinary stethoscopes to be reassembled into a stereophonic stethoscope.

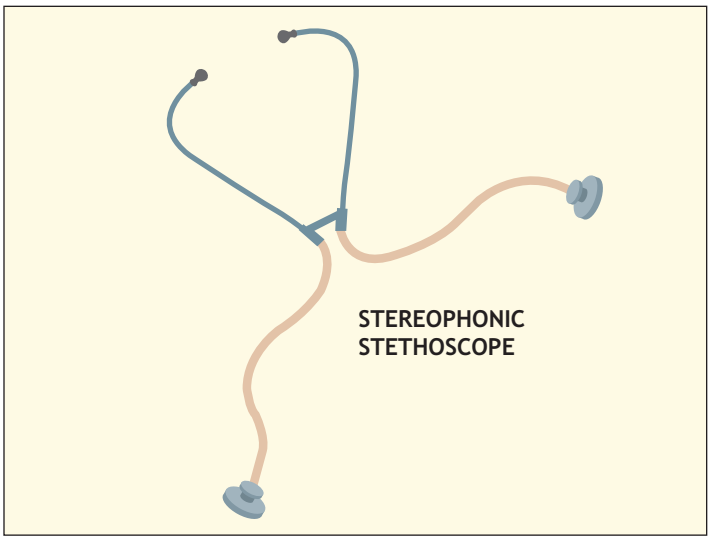

Figure 2: Retaining the top part of 1 of the ordinary stethoscopes, run 1 tube with its own chest piece separately through each of the ear pieces.