

Q U E R Y



I've come to think of my pager as a malignant brick attached to my belt, a hip-slung weight that beeps a maddening frequency, a series of escalating notes that penetrate my brain.

Do-do-do-do-do!

Come and work for me!

I know that my pager is not my master, that it's only a messenger. I shouldn't hate it, but I do. I never needed a pager before I entered the medical profession. Back then I cursed the rudeness of cellphone-flashers, the impertinence of pagers-bearers, the collective electronic noose that cinched tighter around our private selves with the passage of time.

After I decided to become a doctor, I soon learned that part of the job description was to be available. The profession refers to this state in technological terms: being "on call."

In pre-transistor antiquity there was no "call" for physicians as such, since there were no telephones. Doctors in the Canadian hinterland lived their lives in a perpetual state of "call"; how could they refuse Mr. Jones on his horse-drawn carriage when the journey to make entreaties upon the doctor's time took almost a day to complete? Yet the relative difficulty of contact had benefits in preventing nuisance impositions on a doctor's life.

Do-do-do-do-do!

Dr. Ursus, a patient's family is here at the hospital and they want to talk to you. I know you're in your office, but ... Dr. Ursus, a patient of yours is in the emergency department and he needs to be admitted ... Dr. Ursus, one of your pregnant patients has

just gone into labour and the maternity nurses need you right away ... Dr. Ursus, the druggist wants to ask you about a medication you prescribed ... Dr. Ursus, one of the floor nurses has a question...

It is not the responsibility in my life as a doctor that is grinding, so much as the way it is expressed by a slavish schedule. Walk-ins are crammed between regular appointments as I phone-jockey with specialists and commune with appliances more than I affix my stethoscopes to chests. The electronic universe makes me interact in an electronic way with email and the press of a pager button, and my availability has become less valued as a consequence: whereas it was once a major imposition to request a doctor's services after hours, it has now become a major right, even a need, and the aural affirmation of that need chimes on my belt over a dozen times a day.

In my practice, I'd travel to the ends of the earth for a patient who needed me just that much. Of course, when one is "on call," the perception is that one is bothered *too* much, even if all the bother turns out to be justified. Maybe I pine for a storied time when bothering the doctor meant real effort on the part of the patient. Maybe I'm a call crab that hates being a doctor after hours. Or maybe I hate the trend of our age, the belief that answers are at the touch of a button, and that anything can be answered in the time it takes to pick up a phone and start a pager ringing.

— Dr. Ursus