

Matrix Lesson 79

Never answer an unattended,
ringing medical center telephone

The difference between a teenager and an adult is that when a phone rings the teenager desperately hopes that the call is for him.* Nowhere is this more vividly portrayed than with the unattended, ringing medical center telephone.

You are sitting and writing a progress note. You are standing at the nursing station. You are relaxing in the surgeons' lounge. You are walking down an empty hospital corridor. You are blissfully alone, involved in the work of the day. You pass a wall-mounted phone. It rings. You have paged no-one. It rings again. No-one is around to answer it. The nurses go about their work. Orderlies and residents walk by. The crucial decision is upon you.

* Various attributed to Dorothy Parker, HL Mencken, Bennett Cerf and others.

I will give you the benefit of many tortuous excursions into the byways of a major medical center: *DO NOT ANSWER THAT PHONE!*

There were no phones on the Isle of Cos when Hippocrates went into practice. Galen did not have phones, nor did Paracelsus, Maimonides or Semmelweiss. Avicenna did not have a phone nor did Theophrastus Bombastus. If Fleming had had a phone in his lab we never would have heard of penicillin.

These men did their work unencumbered by the ringing telephone. If they had such phones and if they made the key error of answering them, they would be nameless physicians. They would not have made their great contributions. They would have had the medically frustrating experience of *phonus interruptus* - the interruption of the medical day with a disturbing unrelated phone call.

“Your day is tough enough without absorbing the electronically transmitted ills of people you do not even know.”

If that ringing phone is answered, there is a 99% chance that you will involve yourself with a most distasteful situation. *Never, ever answer that phone!*

If you do, you will become involved in some inextricably difficult hospital problem from which there is no exit. You will get involved in a cyclonic swirl of medical misery. *Do not answer that phone!*

That solitary ringing phone is a busy surgeon's worst nightmare. It is a ring which will destroy your day and will involve you in a course of events over which you have no control.

These calls fall into four general categories:

■ The random call.

If the phone is answered, the voice (which, incidentally, never waits for a response) will say:

"Tell Bernie I'll take the Rams plus the points."

"Tell Power-ranger that the eagle flies at night."

"If Marie is there I'll come over and kill you."

The random call is the most innocuous and sometimes actually brightens a day. But this call is uncommon. One is more likely to get other types of calls.

■ The family call.

The Carter family is extremely upset at the care Dad has been receiving. They call the nursing stations, the administrators and generally have a working knowledge of all of the phone extensions. One does not want to have anything to do with this family, even if it is the menial task of forwarding a message.

■ The maintenance call.

Manny from plant operations is ready to flush the hoister valves, causing brown liquid to come out of several showers. He will only call once, and this is the extension he was given. He hangs up. After this call, clanking noises begin to arise from behind the walls. You are now in the middle of an ecologic-plumbing disaster.

■ The lab call.

"Alice Grieg has a positive blood culture."

"The potassium is nine."

"There is tumor at the margin."

One does not want to hear this or be involved in these situations. Misery is attached to each statement as it comes through the phone. Your day is tough enough without absorbing the electronically transmitted ills of people you do not even know.

Ignoring the ringing phone is not an abrogation of medical responsibility. It is not an unfair or selfish act. It is not a violation of the Hippocratic Oath. Rather, avoiding those calls is a reasonable move in the middle of a busy day designed to facilitate that day.

Be vigilant - focus on your surgical duties and above all: *do not answer that phone!*