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Reuben, David B

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A PIECE OF MY MIND

So Long, Old Friend

David B. Reuben, MD
Multicampus Program
in Geriatric Medicine
and Gerontology, David
Geffen School of
Medicine, University of
California, Los Angeles.

In the 44 years that I have been a physician, I have had a steadfast and vocal companion at every step of my career—my pager. And last week, I turned mine in. No, I'm not retiring, though many my age have. My hospital is eliminating pagers. New technology that routes page messages to mobile phones is less expensive and more reliable. So pagers or beepers, as they were called decades ago, have gone the way of the head mirror and tuning fork, medical paraphernalia largely of historical interest.

My decades with the pager have shadowed my career in medicine beginning with audible chirps that signaled me to call the paging operator to find out who was looking for me, to the 5 numbers that flashed across the tiny LCD (liquid crystal display) screen indicating the extension to call, to the alphanumeric pagers that allow messages slightly shorter than tweets. Over the years, the pager has changed its tones, eventually allowing silence, just a vibration but still enough to startle me when it goes off. However, the basic function of the pager has not changed since its inception: in a chivalrous interpretation, to alert me to someone who is in need; in a cynical interpretation, to annoy me, sometimes seemingly purposefully.

My pager has been at my side, ever waiting to convey patient care responsibilities ranging from a request for a diet order to notification that a patient has experienced a cardiac arrest. Before email and text messaging, pagers were a mainstay of quick communication about personal matters, for example, that it was time to meet another house officer in the hospital cafeteria for dinner. The pager has summoned me into the department chair's office when I made a big mistake, let me know that my academic promotion went through, and called me in from home when patients needed preoperative clearance in the middle of the night. Sometimes when I am on call, its eruptions have been so closely spaced that I thought that the pages were duplicates, only to realize that, at the moment, I was very popular. At other times, the call night was so slow that I paged myself just to make sure that the hardware and cellular system were working correctly.

Unintentionally, I have often responded emotionally to the pager, initially with delight as a newly minted physician. When I returned pages, nurses addressed me respectfully as "doctor." They had no idea that I knew nothing...or maybe they did. Over the years, the relationship with my pager has taken many turns. At times, I was filled with pure hatred at its ever present intrusiveness. I confess that, once, I threw a pager on the floor in anger. The injured device was quickly and unquestioningly replaced by a cheery paging operator. She had seen this situation before.

But despite the sometimes rocky relationship, the pager has become a part of my attire, clipped on my

belt from breakfast to bedtime, and part of my identity. I was secure in knowing that, if needed, I could be reached. This feeling allowed me the privilege of not giving out my cell phone number to people who might have trouble with boundaries. I told them, "If you need me, I'm available on pager," which I'm certain acted as a deterrent to some, effectively filtering out unimportant calls. And with this dependence, I have occasionally become frantic after misplacing the pager or forgetting it at home.

Much has transpired during my time with the pager. As a second-year resident on an intensive care unit rotation, I was paged to tell me about the availability of a breakthrough new drug. The drug was cimetidine and for a brief time, it was revolutionary. Through the initial AIDS epidemic, pagers were the only way to immediately contact physicians about these gravely ill patients. In the last decade, pagers, however, have become less important, most often being used as a formal mechanism of contact for health care workers who did not know each other well enough to call personal phone numbers or send a text.

Now my pager is gone forever, replaced by a new and improved tether. "Send me a page" is now "text me." Yet the smartphone that now handles my professional access is far more intrusive and scarier. Yes, it can do all the functions that my old pager could and much more. It is the "much more" that is frightening. With the smartphone, people have 4 routes of access to me: page, phone, text, and email, and I must be vigilant to all. With multifactor authentication, the device is a necessity for me to link to our electronic health record, to gain remote access to email on the computer, and to dozens of professional websites. If I lose the smartphone, I am effectively on a desert island.

The status of the pager as a physician's constant companion has also changed. Part of this may be the secular trend towards unlimited access in all aspects of our lives. As a result, the pager's successors are perceived as less intrusive. Yet newer generations of physicians have become increasingly protective of time off. Many physicians now impose strict limits on professional access. At the end of a shift, they simply sign their pagers out and there are no further worries about getting called with work-related questions.

Over the years, I have developed routines that ensure that I do things right, even when I am distracted or tired. I structure my days to build in lifestyle breaks for exercise, writing, and keeping up with the national news. Each night, I carefully place 4 items on my desk, so I don't need to search for them when I'm rushing to get out of the house in the morning: keys, wallet, smartphone, and pager. These are the wearable connectors of my daily life. And now there are 3.

Corresponding

Author: David B. Reuben, MD, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, Division of Geriatrics, 10945 Le Conte Ave, Ste 2339, Los Angeles, CA 90095 (dreuben@mednet.ucla.edu).

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