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PRACTICE

Here's my number.

2 February 2014



Opinion by Robin Youngson.

Last year I met a primary care physician in the USA who gives his personal mobile phone number to every one of his patients. How often do they call? Almost never. But when they do, it's likely to be really important.

I guess you wouldn't be surprised to learn that this doctor has the highest patient satisfaction rating of any doctor in the whole of California. He's also one of the happiest and most fulfilled doctors I have ever met. The secret to his success is that he figured out how to truly *serve* his patients.

It's the small things that make a difference. I recently saw a young mother during a routine pre-discharge round of patients given epidural pain-relief in childbirth. As anaesthetists, we worry about persisting numbness because it could be a warning sign of very rare but potentially serious complications. This mother complained of mild numbness and a slight feeling of weakness in one leg.

The complicating factor is that these symptoms are relatively common after childbirth, whether or not the mother has had an epidural injection. I was almost certain her symptoms had an innocent cause and would resolve in a few days or weeks. But I was also concerned that she might have difficulty getting prompt medical attention if the problem didn't resolve. She wasn't my patient but after a moment's hesitation I gave her my personal mobile phone number saying, "Please call me if you have any problems, or if this doesn't get better."

At the heart of service lies personal accountability. We all know healthcare systems are imperfect and it's easy to blame others or to vent our frustration about a lack of follow-up. But if we wish to serve our patients well, we could better ask ourselves, "*What can I do to help?*" or "*How can I fix this problem?*"

These small acts of care and concern are surprising to patients and they enhance the quality of the relationship. These actions say, no matter how busy the professional, the patient's concerns are important.

When I suggest to colleagues in the public hospital that they might give their mobile number to patients, they often react with horror. Do we really trust our patients so little? What does that say about our practice?

Image: "[Woman on phone](#)" by Marjan Lavarevsji

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One Response to "Here's my number."

[Yasmina Marquez](#) says:

[April 19, 2014 at 6:39 pm](#)

Muchas gracias por esta información, la verdad que es bueno conseguir paginas como esta, ahora mismo iniciaré un proyecto que tiene mucho que ver.

“When all members of an organization are motivated to understand and value the most favourable features of its culture, it can make rapid improvements.”

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