

A MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF A FAMILY PHYSICIAN

May I have your phone number?

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I was ending my consultation when a patient asked me a difficult question: ‘May I have your phone number?’ Sitting beside me was my patient, who is a retired specialist whom I consider as one of my senior colleagues. I always have the dilemma of sharing my personal phone number to patients. I do not mind giving it to my colleagues or telephonists for professional courtesy. Meanwhile, giving out my phone number can be assuring to patients, especially those I am worried about, and even me. Worried patients can also be reassured whenever they have any problems or whenever new issues arise. This can improve rapport and promote trust. Since patients can reach me directly, efficiency can be improved, and unnecessary face-to-face consultations can be reduced. All of us can imagine the misery of waiting on the phone and talking to robots.

However, the most important drawback of sharing my phone number is invasion of privacy. I want to protect the professional boundaries between a patient and a physician. Unfortunately, there are patients who abuse this privilege, although the proportion might be small and addressable. To date, almost all patients who have my phone number have contacted me during busy clinic hours; accordingly, I may need to address or be tempted to respond to their calls urgently. I have also heard first-hand of a physician’s phone number that was being used for illegal purposes and even sent death threats. This had carried serious consequences. There is also the legal issue of virtual consultation if any negative outcomes were to happen to the patient, especially when using my private phone number.

There are perhaps a few solutions to this. I can use a second phone number specifically for these purposes. I can also block the phone number of patients, particularly those who I do not expect to hear back from or have been abusing the privilege. Nonetheless, it is counter-intuitive to give out my phone number in the first place. I can also opt to block only phone calls and leave the texting option available to these patients. Lastly, I can also choose which patient I would give my phone number to. I would expect certain respect for boundaries from patients I recognise will appreciate this privilege. Establishing rules and boundaries upfront may also help for this purpose. This can be achieved by informing patients the purpose of giving out my phone number, such as to inform test results or urgent rescheduling of appointments. Important rules, including contact during office hours only and no consultation on behalf of family members, need to be set before I share my phone number. Yet, there is always the risk of abuse. Thus, where do I draw the line between my professional and personal lives? Have I cared too much?

Unfortunately, these solutions are not particularly enticing for me. Therefore, at the time, I politely declined his request. Three months later, I received a phone call from an unknown number. It was him. He was asking about his eligibility to be recruited into a service in my clinic. After the brief consultation, I decided not to block his number. Still, I guess my phone number is not much of a secret anymore. As the saying goes, “when there’s a will, there’s a way”.