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Outcome and duration of telephone consultations in a general practice

Sir,

The telephone has an important role in general practice but research on its use in the UK is scarce.¹ Marsh and colleagues² found that 59% of incoming out-of-hours calls were managed by telephone advice. They observed no detriment to patients' health from such consultations and called for further discussion and research in this area. Together with colleagues we studied the incoming calls to a general practice during office hours and found that one-third of callers wished to speak to the doctor.³ The study described here provides further details on such calls to one general practitioner (J.S.B.).

During 35 surgery sessions over a four-week period, the general practitioner recorded the nature, outcome and duration (to the nearest minute) of telephone consultations. The doctor had a personal list of about 1700 patients within a practice of four doctors (total of 7600 patients) situated in a socially deprived, inner city area of Glasgow. Seventy per cent of patients have a telephone at home and the receptionists allow patients to speak to the doctors on medical matters without hindrance.

Over the four-week period there were 85 telephone consultations; a mean of 2.4 per surgery session. Women made 56 of the calls and men 29. Most concerned upper respiratory tract infection and a range of minor gastrointestinal problems. Another group of calls were for general advice and discussion. Of the telephone consultations 58% resulted in a prescription, 14% in a home visit and the remainder in advice alone. The prescribing rate of 58% was higher than expected but many patients are eligible for free prescriptions and may readily telephone for a remedy for minor illness. Marsh and colleagues also prescribed frequently for out-of-hours telephone consultations.²

The duration of 71 consecutive telephone consultations was recorded; the median duration was two minutes (range one to 15 minutes; mean 2.8 minutes; mode one minute). The total time was equivalent to half of a surgery session per week. Fifteen per cent of all consultations over the four-week period were conducted on the telephone.

Patients who telephone the doctor have the advantage of an immediate consultation, reduced travel costs, less time off work and they avoid the wait in the surgery. However, on average they receive only half the time of a face to face consultation (admittedly many problems were straightforward), they do not have the privacy of the face to face consultation and they obtain a diagnosis made without examination. Such telephone calls sometimes interrupt a face to face consultation which may cause stress for the doctor and the consulting patient, and impair the consultation. However, the four partners in the practice believe that the advantages of the current telephone policy exceed the disadvantages.

Though the ratio of telephone calls to surgery consultations is probably lower in the UK than in North America⁴ or Israel,⁵ work of this kind is by no means insignificant and clearly merits further attention.

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Pharmacies in health centres

Sir,

It has been suggested that increased cooperation between general practitioners and pharmacists would benefit the patient.¹ Health centres provide an appropriate environment in which to investigate relations between general practitioners and pharmacists. In England there are over 1000 health centres, of which approximately one in 10 incorporates an integral pharmacy.

We recently completed a survey of all 101 health centres in England with pharmacies and examined the frequency of consultation of pharmacists by general practitioners. Such close proximity of general practitioners and pharmacists could heighten any existing anxieties over traditional professional boundaries or it could enhance cooperation between the two professions.

Table 1 indicates that approximately half of the 93 pharmacists who responded were consulted more than 10 times each week, with 9.7% consulted 30 times a week or more. Only 6.5% of pharmacists considered themselves 'hardly ever consulted'. This compared markedly with a matched control sample of 101 communi-

Table 1. Frequency of consultation of pharmacists by general practitioners.

Pharmacists consulted:	% of pharmacists
30 times per week or more	9.7
10-29 times per week	36.5
Less than 10 times per week	47.3
Hardly ever	6.5

ty pharmacists; of the 90 who responded 24.4% estimated they were 'hardly ever consulted'.

It appears that the inclusion of a pharmacy within a health centre results in increased frequency of consultation. Where two professionals work so closely together each acquires an appreciation of the other's function, so that they work for their mutual benefit and ultimately that of the patient.

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Referral of women with chronic pelvic pain

Sir,

Chronic pelvic pain in women is one of the most difficult problems faced by general practitioners and gynaecologists. Although many gynaecologists feel that a gynaecological problem is unlikely in the majority of these cases, large numbers of investigations, including laparoscopies, continue to be performed. I have reviewed 200 cases of chronic pelvic pain of more than one year's duration referred to three teaching hospitals.

Apart from tenderness on abdominal and/or vaginal examinations clinical assessment failed to produce any positive findings in 142 cases (71%). In 38 patients (19%) vaginal discharge was noticed, ovarian cysts were felt in four (2%) and the uterus was enlarged in 14 (7%). Investigations were performed in 102 cases (51%). Positive results were obtained from cultures of high vaginal swabs and/or urine specimens in 38 cases (19%) — all were treated for infection, but only seven patients reported partial improvement in their pain and only two that the pain had gone completely. Twenty six patients (13%) were scanned — eight (4%) had ovarian cysts, 10 (5%) had an enlarged uterus and no abnormality was detected in the remaining eight (4%). Of the 174 patients (87%) who underwent laparoscopy, no abnormality was detected in 150. There was evidence of endometriosis in nine patients, pelvic inflammatory disease in five, adhesions from previous operations in eight, ovarian cysts in four and periappendicular adhesions in two. Only half of these positive

laparoscopic findings were considered to be a possible cause for the pelvic pain. Of the 200 patients only 26 (13%) improved as a result of gynaecological treatment.

Gynaecological assessment failed to reach a diagnosis in the majority of the cases, in spite of the fact that 87% of the patients underwent laparoscopy. This suggests that chronic pelvic pain has a psychological rather than an organic origin in the vast majority of cases. Even those who support organic causes for pelvic pain admit that a substantial number of patients improve after a period of psychological counselling.^{1,2}

Too many cases are referred to gynaecologists, too many laparoscopies are being performed and the possibility of a psychogenic origin for the pain is not adequately explored. The referral letters were too brief in 78% of the cases with no assessment of the patient's background. General practitioners are well placed to assess the psychological and social background of patients.

The majority of these patients are seen in the gynaecology clinic by junior or middle grade staff who worry about missing an organic cause for the pain. Thus, in many cases the gynaecological opinion is given by a hospital doctor who may be less experienced than the referring general practitioner. The decision to perform a laparoscopy should not be taken lightly, because the procedure has a definite morbidity and mortality.³ Such an invasive procedure should not be the method used to differentiate between patients who have an organic or psychogenic cause for their pain. The financial cost of these unnecessary procedures and the burden on the waiting lists and hospital staff should also be considered. In 1974, over 10 000 laparoscopies were performed to investigate pelvic pain in 382 hospitals all over the UK.³ Laparoscopy has become a more familiar operation, so the figure is probably now much higher.

Assessment of chronic pelvic pain in general practice should include a search for possible psychological factors as well as physical examination and bacteriological tests for urinary tract or pelvic infection. If a gynaecological cause is suspected, ultrasound scanning of the lower abdomen is a useful non-invasive investigation. Referring such patients to a gynaecology clinic without this assessment may result in patients undergoing an unnecessary procedure involving general anaesthesia. In the gynaecology clinic, these patients should be assessed by an experienced gynaecologist.

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Triglyceride screening in the surgery

Sir,

Despite earlier controversy, a raised triglyceride level is accepted as a coronary artery disease risk factor in its own right and its measurement is necessary to type the hyperlipidaemia. Fasting samples are not required for cholesterol concentrations and are necessary only in those with raised triglyceride values. Opportunistic screening for hyperlipoproteinaemia is appropriate in primary care¹ and target blood lipid concentrations for general practice have recently been published by the British Hyperlipidaemia Association.²

We use Reflotron test strips (Boehringer) to determine cholesterol and triglyceride levels in the surgery. The accuracy of the strips is monitored by the hospital laboratory and a quality assurance scheme for test-strip cholesterol has been organized by the Wolfson Research Laboratory, Birmingham. Good correlation between the surgery and the hospital laboratory for both analytes has been achieved.

The levels of triglyceride requiring intervention remain controversial and the risk for coronary events is probably not linear. Mild hypertriglyceridaemia (3.0–6.0 mM) is usually due to obesity or alcoholism and is associated with significant hypercoagulability.³ Below 3.0 mM specific treatment is usually unnecessary. Levels above 5.0 mM⁴ or 6.0 mM² require vigorous dietary control and sometimes drug therapy as there is also an increased risk of pancreatitis.

Of 215 patients screened opportunistically in the surgery, 14 (6.5%) had moderately or seriously raised triglyceride levels. Two patients had triglyceride levels above 5.0 mM, both of whom were seriously overweight, consumed excess alcohol and had cholesterol levels above 6.5 mM. There were 12 patients with triglyceride levels between 3.0 and 5.0 mM, eight of whom had cholesterol levels of less than 6.5 mM.