

Is This the Icehouse?

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When I was a child the phone rang a lot at our house, especially in the evenings and on weekends. My dad was a doctor. If someone wanted to talk to him after the office was closed, they called our house. Our home number was listed right below my dad’s office number in the phone book—yes, a paper book containing all the local phone numbers, and our telephone was vintage 1960s, featuring a rotary dial with a curved handset attached by a coiled cord.

Our family predictably had dinner every night promptly at 6:30 PM—my parents’ commitment to family time. Often the phone would ring almost as soon as my dad sat down at the dinner table. We joked that an invisible button in the seat of his chair alerted patients that he was home. As a child, I thought it funny. When I grew older, I wondered, *How could so many urgent problems arise just 1 hour after his office closed?*

My brothers and I frequently answered these after-hours and weekend calls. We sometimes amused one another with puerile quips. “Joe’s Mule Barn, mule speaking” and “Abe’s Mortuary, you stab ’em, we slab ’em” were two of our favorites. Patients would usually laugh. When she overheard, my mother would offer a frown, but more than once I saw her covering a smile. Once a nurse replied, “So which one of the mules am I speaking with?”

When I was in high school, I would often talk by phone at length with my girlfriend. My parents’ solution was to get a second phone line that my brothers and I could use to talk to our friends and not tie up my dad’s line. This number was not listed in the phone book and was private, reserved for personal calls. With time, our unlisted phone number got out to our friends’ parents and friends of those parents, and to people at church. We would get patient calls on our unlisted private line. My brothers and I didn’t like this. Our unlisted number was for us, not for patients. So, when patients would call our private line, we would say “You need to call the other number,” and give them the listed number. This was only moderately successful. We later developed a more amusing strategy by saying “He’s not here. Call up to the big house; the number’s listed in the phone book.” My mother later learned of this antic when a patient stopped her at church and wanted to know whether her boys lived out back. She smiled and responded, “I often don’t know where those boys are!”

Friends and family were sometimes deceitfully playful when calling. When my uncle called, he routinely asked, “Is this the icehouse?”—a throwback to the prerefrigerator days when my grandmother phoned in orders for her kitchen ice box—or perhaps, as I later learned, a colloquialism for a south Texas open air beer establishment. And once a friend called, disguising his voice and saying “I’m calling from the Sheriff’s office about an arrest warrant,” and then he went on for several minutes with a made-up tale about finding marijuana in my car and needing me and my parents to come in for questioning. I grew increasingly anxious until my friend lost his composure and started laughing!

Later I became a primary care doctor myself, equipped with a smartphone, digital pager, and wireless connection to patient medical records. I rarely talk to hospital nurses by phone anymore; they send me text messages to which I respond via the hospital’s electronic health record. Patients email me questions that my dad would have discussed by phone or during an office visit. After-hour urgencies are handled by an on-call nurse practitioner or an urgent care center. My dad never could have imagined that a less personal communication system might be more efficient and even safer. And it seems like everyone has my phone number. There’s no such thing as a private line anymore. The numerous calls I get, from telemarketers or political endorsements, are screened by my smartphone’s

caller ID, which alerts me that it's likely spam. I don't even answer. No more quipping "Joe's Mule Barn" or "Abe's Mortuary." That fun's gone forever. And no one ever calls me anymore asking whether this is the icehouse.

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