

Eulogy for a Radio Pager

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“On call nights, it rested on the bedside table. I estimate that I wore it for more than 15,000 days and slept with it beside me for over 2,500 call nights. And, now, it is gone, replaced by an app on my cell phone. Poof. It feels as if one of my extremities has been amputated.”

Beeper 3099 was issued to me during my orientation as a fledgling Assistant Professor in early July of 1980. It hung on my right hip every workday in its little plastic holster like a compact, modern-day six gun, ready for a quick draw at any moment. On call nights, it rested on the bedside table. I estimate that I wore it for more than 15,000 days and slept with it beside me for over 2,500 call nights. And, now, it is gone, replaced by an app on my cell phone. Poof. It feels as if one of my extremities has been amputated.

“Our Division of Neonatology bought an early cellular telephone for the on-call attending. It was in a bag the size of a briefcase and had a spiral corded handset like the ones on the desktop telephones of today and an enormous battery. It weighed about 10 pounds. It was incredibly liberating as I no longer had to use the pay phone to answer a page.”

A radio pager is a one-way texting device. In my early days as an attending, there were no cell phones. My two young boys were active with T-Ball and youth baseball, and I was an assistant coach. When I was on call while at the ballpark, I made sure I had sufficient change in my pocket to respond to a page using the pay phone; it was a quick trip across the street from the park. Pay phones have also disappeared from the landscape with the advent of the ubiquitous cell phone. Our Division of Neonatology bought an early cellular telephone for the on-call attending. It was

in a bag the size of a briefcase and had a spiral corded handset like the ones on the desktop telephones of today and an enormous battery. It weighed about 10 pounds. It was incredibly liberating as I no longer had to use the pay phone to answer a page. If I was driving, I no longer had to search for a pay phone before I could respond to a page.

Many pages came from our Medical Information Services via Telephone (MIST) operators. This toll-free service allows medical professionals from around my state and the nation to reach an attending physician at our medical center for a consultation or referral. Pages came any time of the day or night, usually from a physician anxious to transfer an infant to our facility. After taking the needed information, I would use the MIST service to page our transport coordinator to set up the transport. I would then get another page once the team had arrived at the referring hospital and evaluated the baby. Things usually ran smoothly with the simple pager and the MIST operators.

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The pager itself was a model of efficiency and simplicity. It was only replaced once in over 40 years and never needed a software or operating system upgrade. It just worked and only needed a fresh battery every 6 months or so. The strident beeps were insistent and commanded prompt attention. Many times on call nights, I would dream that my pager had gone off, necessitating my awakening to determine if there was, in fact, a message. In later years, this also required putting on my glasses as presbyopia rendered the text unreadable without them.

Now it has gone, and I miss it.

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