

Telephone Manners

My first contact with a telephone was when I was a very small child. Someone wanted me to speak on the phone, and I had to ask which end went to the ear and which one towards the mouth. My local guide directed me. The person at the other end of the line must have heard my question, but did not tease me about it. I am grateful to him for not adversely affecting the developing psychology of a growing child. Though I did not know then which end of the receiver went where, I know very well I was expected to say 'Hello' as the first thing. I still do. I suppose different people have different tastes, and prefer to say things other than 'Hello' as starters.

I have heard a number of people on phone, who perhaps make perfect sense to themselves, but not to the person at the other end of the line. Some of them say 'Who is speaking' as the opening gambit, without even first identifying themselves. I cannot see why I or anyone else should answer that question, because when anyone calls, he/she wants something from the person he/she has called, and some politeness is warranted in such a situation. One of my staff members did this to me once, when I was in the operation theater. I must have been on the edge then. I answered "I am 'Brahmadev'," the God who knows all. I probably wanted to point out that the caller should not expect me to identify her using my own powers like that God and answer the question. It worked. The next sentence was polite, asking me to please call Mr. so-and-so. I obliged.

There is a special category of people made of Boss-material, though not necessarily Bosses themselves. They get someone to ring someone for them. I cannot mind if the caller is my Boss, and too busy to make the call himself/herself. But if someone gets a subordinate to call me, and once I am on line gets the subordinate to put me on hold until he/she is ready to speak to me, I get quite bugged. I don't like to listen to the hold-music when I have been dragged away from my work or pleasure by someone who wants something from me. I suppose it is a method of establishing one's importance, real or imaginary. Perhaps these are people in training to become Boss one day, and want to practice the art to perfection before they actually become Boss.

One can read a person from the way he/she says 'Hello'. A business-like 'Halo' indicates a no-nonsense, practical, non-time-wasting person. A 'Haloooooo' comes from a shallow person, slow in thinking, trying to steal time for thinking what to say after that 'Haloooooo'. A 'Hallllo' indicates a person who has never adjusted to speaking on a phone, but does not want it revealed. A 'Haaaaalo' comes from one who wants to appear smarter than one actually is, but does not realize that this pronunciation does not achieve that result.

There are callers who sometimes get wrong numbers, like anyone else. When informed of the fact, they mutter something impolite under the breath or don't even mutter anything and bang the phone down. I think saying 'Sorry' would be appropriate. When that happened to me a few times, I got sufficiently angry, and banged the phone down myself when someone got my number instead of the person he/she had called. Understand that caller might have been from the polite category, and I was punishing perhaps a wrong person. But it save me the energy I would have spent saying 'Wrong number,' and also let out the anger I had accumulated over time, bringing peace to my life once again.

There are people like telephone operators who say 'Namaskar' (salute), followed by the name of the institute/organization they work for. That works well for their

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company's business. I like that. There are others who prefer to pick up the phone and just not say anything. They are probably the cautious ones, ready to say 'Wrong number' if the caller is someone they do not wish to speak to. There is a not-so-cautious subvariety of this type. These people pick up the phone so that it stops ringing, but continue their ongoing conversation with whoever they are with, and speak on the phone only when they finish that conversation. They probably do not mind if the caller listens to their private conversation.

There are censor types. If you call their place and ask for someone, they will first ask, 'Who is calling?' I suppose it may be necessary in a home situation where the parent wishes to guard the virtue of a daughter or wants to know who the son is associating with. It may be necessary for one to know who is calling the spouse. But in a busy hospital setup, it is a lot easier to just say 'Please hold on' and call the concerned person than first find out who is calling. Wanting to know who is calling implies that one may not call the person asked for if the caller is not of desired status.

There are those confused types, who pick up the phone but don't know what to do afterwards. When you ask them to call someone, they put the phone down on the table, off the cradle, and go about their own business. You can hear the background noise, other people's conversations, but no one speaks on the phone. Time passes, your irritation mounts, all to no avail. Putting the phone down and redialing is not an option, because then you get a busy-note. You are stuck until someone sensible notices the phone off the cradle, picks it up and sets matters right. The time taken can seem like an eternity when you have an urgent business with someone at that end.

The more dangerous type of telephone users spreads menace not through speech, but through action. These are the people who wear surgical gloves as universal precautions while handling patients or their body products. They are well protected from HIV and other infections that can be contacted from patients. I have seen some of these people pick up the phone with their gloves on. I want to publish this as a method of transmission of HIV in a reputed journal. The FBI and CIAS use the term 'sterile phone' to describe a phone that does not have an eavesdropping device attached to it. Now the time has come to use it for a phone that has not been handled with such gloved hands.

There are some who can indirectly dangerous to patient care through their use of the telephones. These people are posted in critical areas like operation theaters. They often monopolize the phone and keep talking to their counterparts in other operation theaters for literally hours. One finds it impossible to reach anyone in the operation theater except by walking to the theater. These people probably consider the workplace as their home away from home, and use the phone the same way as at home.

There are some others who are dangerous because they are not available on the phone when they should be. They are 'taking round' or 'on the work site' whenever called, except outside duty hours. A lot of work gets stalled because they are supposed to do it, and they cannot do it because they never get the information on time.

If I had the administrative power I would do the following.

1. Include 'telephone manners' in the curriculum of undergraduate medical students, nurses, paramedics and other employees of the hospital.
2. Run periodic 'continuing telephone education' courses for all employees of the hospital.
3. Place disposable sterile gloves next to telephone instruments in the hospital,

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for protection from HIV.

4. Provide mobile intercom instruments to all the people whose main job is to receive calls from other people and take action on the information received.