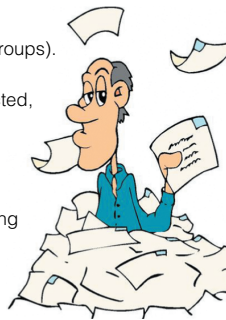


Correspondence received in four weeks

- 814 emails (62 individually addressed; 752 undirected from various mail groups).
- 451 individual pathology results downloaded by computer.
- 181 letters (147 individually addressed; 76 standard-sized letters, undirected, from various organisations; 58 oversized letters, undirected, from various organisations).
- 8 journals (4 subscribed; 4 unsubscribed).
- 8 broadsheets.
- 8 items of other mail, including books and packages of documents, weighing a total of about 3 kg.
- 112 faxes.

Grand total: 1574 individual pieces of communication per month



At the same instant, a loud noise — consistent with partial upper airway obstruction — emanated from the anaesthetised patient. I had to free myself from my captor. Immediately.

My release strategy incorporated pressing most of the buttons on the x-ray machine in a random manner. As all were imprinted with unrecognisable symbols, this seemed a reasonable, and eventually effective (if not a recommended), method for determining the “forward” function.

I quickly returned to the patient’s head and managed the airway problem. Thankfully, the patient’s oxygen saturation did not decrease and the remainder of the anaesthetic was uneventful (the x-ray machine having been escorted out of the theatre by the radiographer on his welcome return).

Although I had been willing and, in fact, keen to expedite the surgical procedure, I suggest that doctors avoid the lure of driving foreign vehicles (they can be savage beasts). □

Communication overload

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TO THE EDITOR: In 1995 and 1998 I was fortunate enough to have extended leave of several weeks. On both occasions, when I averaged out the weight of mail, excluding newspapers, waiting for me on my return, it came to about 7 kg per month.

I wanted to determine the volume of communication I received in 2002, but:

- a substantial amount of my mail is now electronic;
- I no longer have extended holidays;
- mail cannot be now left unopened and unattended. It is opened by a trusted colleague, scanned into our patients’ medical records and the originals left out for me to see on my return;

- being away would lead to a decrease in the mail I received;
- weighing individual mail articles would be a tedious test of sanity.

So, I logged my mail for four weeks from 13 July until 9 July 2002. I have included neither mail addressed to me at home (which is now minimal and consists mainly of household bills and private correspondence) nor newspapers. A summary is shown in the Box; I have the individual log if anyone is interested.

So, how to measure the communication load of a general practitioner? I have weighed it and counted it, but it was not practical to determine how long it took to read. This is because reading it necessitates acting on it, whether this means writing a reply, incorporating it into a patient’s history or recalling a patient to order further tests.

This communication load on GPs is significant and is a further indication of the complexity of our discipline.

The weight of this load has significance for those wishing to communicate with GPs. Anything longer than a page runs a risk of joining the rapidly enlarging pile next to the GP’s desk of material that must be read at the first opportunity. Anything else is condemned to the round filing receptacle under the desk. □

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