

School of the air

A FEMALE PRACTITIONER with young children working part-time in the country faces many challenges. One particular morning I was looking forward to a 7am paediatric journal club meeting to be held by teleconference. There are only six a year, and they are sponsored by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and chaired by Michael Williams from Mackay in Queensland. They are well organised, well presented and packed with information.

The night before the meeting I was feeling very positive about it. Why? I'd remembered the date and time of the meeting for a start, the pre-reading material had arrived and I'd read through it, the kids seemed to understand the pre-telephone meeting talk and I had a cloth nappy folded up ready on our home-office desk next to the phone. Everyone knows telephone meetings require minimal background noise — a remote possibility in a dedicated room in a hospital, but impossible in a "reality" home like ours, with polished floorboards and young children. So I always try to remember a folded up (clean) nappy to put over the mouthpiece of the telephone in an attempt to keep our family decibels out of the meeting. Coincidentally, that night I'd also had a phone call asking if I would speak on the radio about a local charity that had donated items of equipment to the hospital.

At 6.50am things were still going well. All the kids were up, had eaten breakfast and were toileted (thus decreasing the possibility of any, "Mummy, I'm hungry" or "Mummy, I need a wee" requests over the next hour). I'd even washed the dishes (it doesn't take long to learn that Weetbix left on plates quickly turns to cement). The children and I had another pre-telephone meeting talk — they were reminded that, for the next hour, all they had to do was be "quiet friends."

When I dialled the teleconference number, a polished adult voice told me to enter the account number and pin number. My husband had been away for five days so it was great to hear another adult voice, even if it did turn out to be a prerecorded message! I entered the numbers and was told I would be switched through to the conference. Several minutes of soft classical music passed but still no conference. I hung up and dialled again. This time, I was in luck.

The meeting was informative and the kids were good, so I was really enjoying the education. Suddenly, during discus-

sion of a paper reviewing meningococcal meningitis, there was a terrible din outside. Our three kelpie working dogs had found a kangaroo on the front verandah. Why, at the time of a medical telephone journal club meeting? There had never been a kangaroo on the verandah before. Of course nature took over and the dogs chased the kangaroo. Very soon they were all caught up with kids' bikes, toy jumbo trucks and the wheelbarrow in the carport. The dogs barked at the kangaroo and the children yelled at the dogs. I doubted that the folded nappy could contain the noise and was about to hang up, when thankfully the kangaroo disappeared.

There were no more hiccups.

Immediately after the conference I returned the nappy to the cupboard and headed for the toilet — to find no toilet paper — explaining one of the "quiet friends"

activities! As I collected more paper, the phone rang. It was the radio station. They needed to pre-record their interview now.

It really wasn't the ideal time. I hadn't thanked the children for their efforts during the phone meeting; I hadn't warned them that for this particular phone call I needed "silent friends;" I hadn't received the faxes giving me the complete background information; and I still had the toilet roll in my hand — but I agreed to proceed.

The interview started well, but before long world war house broke out. The four children, who now sounded like 44 children, were sick of being "friends" and needed my attention. I asked the interviewer to stop the tape while I settled the warriors. I was under a bit of pressure. There was no button on our phone to give the caller soft classical music, and I'd put the folded nappy away, so I tried gentle cajoling, explicit body language and my best "cross mum" frown. (Isn't it a relief we have telephones in our homes and not videoconferencing?) I tried to explain that I was on the radio, but they are country children. Puzzled, the eldest spoke up, "Mum you're not at the rodeo, you're on the phone." Finally they settled and the interview was continued. When it was all done, still feeling a little hassled, I apologised again to the interviewer for the children fighting. "Oh, no problem," she replied, "It'll be great on the regional news!" and hung up.



Sounds like another party at Dr Gorton's... (Sigh!) ... Rural practice is such a lifestyle decision!

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