

## THE G.P.O. TELEPHONE ANSWERING SET

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Maintaining a "watch" on the telephone is always a problem in a doctor's household, and particularly for half-days and similar off-duty periods. Doctors in the larger towns have facilities for interception and transfer of incoming calls which can be used on request to the operator. They also have call services and message taking bureaux available. Partnerships in the smaller towns are often able to obtain special switching arrangements to suit their particular needs, but the rural general practitioner whose telephone is connected to one of the unattended automatic exchanges has only been able to transfer his calls by having an external extension permanently connected to the house of a neighbour or colleague on the same exchange. Even for holiday periods it may be impossible to make special interception arrangements.

The G.P.O. can now rent a Telephone Answering Set, and from experience over eighteen months with one of these, I consider it meets the needs of a limited group of general practitioners who hitherto have had to employ "telephone sitters" to re-direct their calls. The set is a small sealed tape recorder about the size of a portable typewriter. The mechanism is totally enclosed, and is permanently wired to the telephone. It requires a mains voltage electricity supply. Having only two controls it is very simple to operate. There is a four-way switch giving OFF, ON (connected to telephone), CHECK (play back), and RECORD; and there is a push button to start the tape going while the desired message is spoken into the ordinary telephone (sometimes an additional telephone is provided for this). While recording is in progress a pointer moves across a dial to show how much time remains.

The G.P.O. regulations require that the message be restricted to:

- (a) Your telephone number and name.
- (b) The statement that it is a recorded announcement.
- (c) An explanation of your absence and your expected time of return.
- (d) An alternative telephone number at which you may be called or at which a message will be accepted.

I understand that these restrictions are primarily intended to

prevent commercial advertising, but in practice they have not been onerous. Although the recording lasts only 20 seconds this has proved to be ample time for the longest message needed yet. Messages have usually taken the following form:

“ This is a recorded message from Rural 284. Please listen carefully. Today is Dr Smith’s half-day; if you need a doctor today please phone Dr Brown at Byre 339. Dr Brown has a surgery at 6 o’clock tonight. This message will be repeated once.”

A caller hears the bell ringing three or four times before the taped message comes on, but in spite of this it has been thought necessary to inset a little padding in the above message as people unused to the telephone tend not to hear the first few words. The machine automatically repeats the message once before switching itself off. If the call is made from a call box the message can be heard without pressing button A, and so the caller still has the necessary coins to ring the alternative number.

Apart from “ off-duty periods ” this machine is very useful for short periods when the doctor’s wife may have to go out for a short while to collect children from school etc. Instead of getting no reply the caller from a distant village is reassured by getting a message telling him to ring again at a definite time. The doctor’s wife can now accept coffee invitations taking her message pad with her! One minor advantage is that a caller may decide not to ring the alternative number if his message is not particularly urgent, whereas on the exchange operated transfer system he may find himself speaking to the other number before he realizes it, and then he usually feels obliged to go on with his message. During the time the machine has been in use there have been no unfavourable comments from patients, and most of them seem to have used it without difficulty.

There are several similar devices available for rental from private firms and details are available at College Headquarters. In some of these the message can only be altered by the suppliers; others can also record an incoming message but these are necessarily more expensive. The G.P.O. machine described here may be obtained through the local Telephone Manager, and costs about £2 to connect with a quarterly rental of £8. It was demonstrated recently at the annual postgraduate weekend of the Thames Valley Faculty.

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