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# Managing personal communication: a guide for the foundation year doctor

## Introduction

Everyone conducts private communication during work time at some point. This may be purely personal, such as with:

- Your partner about when you will be home
- A car salesman about delivery of a car for own use
- Your landlord about your home
- Your nanny about your child.

Alternatively, it may be work-related. This may include talking to:

- Payroll about your salary
- The medical human resources department about locum work
- Your consultant about your performance
- A manager about another team member.

Some could be a mixture, such as:

- With a car salesman about delivery of a car for work use
- With the hospital crèche about your child
- With the hospital accommodation office about your living quarters
- To do with a job application (internal or external).

Communication can be by telephone, e-mail or paper. Internet use will also be covered in this article.

## Means of communication

There are variable ways of contacting doctors for personal reasons while on duty. From outside, this can be via switchboard and the bleep. More recently, it is directly to the doctor's own mobile telephone.

Work extensions may have an external dialling facility. If not, 'outside line' requests can be made via switchboard, who generally trust you to be truthful

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about whether your call is private or work-related. Such calls will always be logged and potentially monitored. Some trusts give you a personal identification number to type in when making external personal calls, which will be charged to your account.

You may be instructed to use your trust e-mail, and use of web-based e-mail may be discouraged or blocked. However, most doctors who rotate in quick succession feel they need a continuous, consistent e-mail address for job correspondence, publications and other matters. Also, some trust e-mail systems quarantine messages deemed to have too much personal content. For example, references to sport can be a trigger for quarantine, but if you are working in sports medicine it may be genuinely work-related. Hospital e-mail contents may be the subject of public disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. You can use NHSnet, which can be accessed from anywhere, including home. However, you should still check your work e-mail, as it may be the default for staff contacting you and you may miss out on vital communications. You should still make sure you give your personal e-mail address to medical human resources and your department if they ask for it. You may or may not be able to use your personal e-mail address for online hours monitoring notification.

Most organizations have internet policies that cover inappropriate, excessive and personal use. As with phones, this is logged and can potentially be monitored. There may be rules about surfing during normal work time but what constitutes 'normal' work time is different for those working shifts. Extensive daytime use may be questioned, but if you are off duty, then you are not impinging on work time. Many hospitals have internet terminals in canteens, which are obviously for reasonable personal use for all staff during breaks.

Some wards and departments have had internet access removed, supposedly to prevent abuse. However, it makes it difficult for junior doctors to use e-mail for communication as well as hindering e-learning, e-portfolios and hours monitoring. You may need to find a suitable machine elsewhere.

### Accommodation

Your residential address may not show up on standard database searches, particularly if it is a new building or comes under the main hospital address. Lay people may not understand that you actually live in a hospital. The accommodation may have a completely different address and postcode from the hospital, even if on-site, and the Royal Mail may deliver there independently, particularly if the property is privately managed. In that case, do not put the hospital name in your address, as your mail may be slower to reach you if it goes via the post room.

The residences may have internal telephones, perhaps with only one line for a whole flat rather than individual rooms. Handsets may or may not be provided. Answering machines are unlikely to be available, and you will need to check the rules on fitting your own. Find out if there is a full direct dial number for incoming calls or whether they should be routed via the main hospital number and your extension. The warden's office will advise you on installing an external service if necessary, and they can be helpful in giving entry access to engineers to prevent you having to take time off. It may be easier to use a mobile phone, particularly if you are only there temporarily. Not giving a landline number for people to ring you on is no longer viewed with suspicion.

Internet access may be available, and you can ask about installation, connection and billing.

### Personal integrity

Some would argue that no private communication should go on at work. Issues of concern for employer and employee could be time taken, use of work facilities such as telephones and confidentiality. However, some personal business cannot conveniently be left till off-duty time, particularly if you are working long hours, including weekends. There may be little opportunity for breaks, although you are entitled to them.

Mobile phone culture has, to an extent, weeded out previous problems of staff using work landlines for personal calls. Many people, unable to locate an area where they will not be overhead, skulk in corridors or even toilets using their own phones, but this has its drawbacks. Confidentiality is not guaranteed, nor can you easily write anything down. You may be paying unnecessarily for a call. Even if you have got free calls, there may be an opportunity cost if you use up your allowance for work.

It can be difficult to take and make mobile calls while in clinical areas, so you could argue that there is no choice but to use a hospital extension. It is best to check your trust's policy on mobile phone use. Be careful of ringing mobile numbers from hospital extensions – even in this day and age, it may be frowned upon and/or restricted because of costs.

If the accommodation, payroll or car-park office is now outsourced on an external number that costs the trust money, you could reason that it used to be an internal call and should be treated no differently now. Find out from switchboard or medical staffing if there is an extension or tie-line, which may not be widely publicized.

You may not want to divulge salary details or individual staff disputes in front of your colleagues and prefer to be alone when discussing such matters.

It could be claimed that as you are on a fixed-term contract and forced to move jobs periodically, you are entitled to pursue this as part of your work. In any case, the NHS Jobs website is usually linked from trust intranets. As reasonable time off for interviews is allowed, then administration time regarding those interviews could also be argued to be allowed. If ringing other hospitals, ask switchboard if there is a tie-line and whether it is free. Be discreet if

possible. Other staff may not realize you are on a fixed-term contract and may be more tolerant of you making calls and using the computer for finding work if they are made aware of this. Switchboard may query a flurry of cost-implicated calls via them.

One organization took a different stance on personal outgoing calls, saying they incurred a tax liability rather than blatantly banning them outright.

As in life generally, moderation is the key. If anyone suspects that you are abusing work time or facilities, it can be questioned and investigated. Even if you can maintain that your activity is legitimate and allegations are unfounded, it is best not to draw scrutiny towards yourself in the first place. You should familiarize yourself with, and adhere to, trust policies on telephone, e-mail and internet use.

### Conclusions

With communication that could be construed as personal or private, it is best to be circumspect and not blatantly abuse systems. Make sure you comply with trust policies on telephone and e-mail use. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine. Her views are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer or any other organization that she is associated with.*

### KEY POINTS

- It could be argued that use of a certain amount of work time and facilities for personal or private matters is permissible.
- Sometimes, there is a blurred line between personal and work-related material.
- You should exercise discretion.
- Make sure you comply with trust policies.

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