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## Paging Study Finds That the Doctor Is Often Out

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Still waiting to hear from the doctor? Maybe he never got that page message.

A research letter published recently in the Archives of Internal Medicine looked at the results of a two-month study of more than 10,000 pages sent at two Canadian hospitals. The study found that 14 percent of pages sent internally never reached the intended doctor because he or she was unavailable -- either on scheduled leave, such as a vacation, or not on call.

Close to half the pages reviewed for the study were urgent, including one related to a patient with a dangerously high glucose level requiring a prescribed medication. The study did not look at the effect of the missed messages on patient outcomes.

Brian Wong, a physician at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, says he decided to do the study after a page was sent to him by mistake, delaying care for a patient with chest pain. (In a separate study, researchers are planning to look at the impact of such wrong numbers.)

Even where older paging systems are being augmented or supplanted, Wong's study is relevant, because new technology is useless unless the patient or hospital knows whom to contact and at what address or number, says Joseph Kvedar, director of the Center for Connected Health in Boston. Kvedar advises patients to ask their doctors if they are reachable on any service other than the office telephone, and to update that information at each visit.

Another question is how long you should wait for a message to be returned before seeking other help. At Pediatric & Adolescent Care of Silver Spring, for example, parents are told to call the after-hours paging system again if their first call is not returned within 30 minutes.

-- **Francesca Lunzer Kritz**

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