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Beep of a pager or alert on smartphone: Ease versus safety in clinical communications

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Majority of health care professionals use a third-party communication software called whatsApp for clinical communications. It is an easy way of sharing medical documents at the cost of reduction in verbal communication, risk of confidentiality breach and threats from cyber-attacks. On the other hand, the pager device being used in many health care systems is a unidirectional communication. Our study focused on these modalities of communication among doctors of The Aga Khan University Hospital. Our aim was to note which modality is considered better and has fewer threats to medical data. We submitted an online survey form to all the interns and residents working at our institute and collected their response in a month's time. 162 submissions were recorded. 65% think that whatsApp is quicker than pager. 54% of them considered whatsApp to be causing nuisance from work related notifications in their off-work hours. 60% think that they are more likely to miss information through pager system because of the unidirectional nature. Almost all (96%) of residents and interns found whatsApp to be useful in terms of saving information for future reference. For urgent issues, majority (70%) preferred pager over whatsApp and pager was considered more valid in terms of hospital policies and legal issues. However, the major drawback of using whatsApp for clinical communication is shared with everyone was threat to patients' confidentiality as clinicians usually share pictures, clinical documents, etc. Lastly, we asked them if they think there is a need of a separate application for instant communication dedicated to clinical communication only and 90% responded positively. Therefore, we concluded that the greatest drawback with whatsApp is the risk of breach in patients' confidentiality and off-work disturbance. We recommend a more secure, institute-run application for all intra hospital communications.

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