

Noise at Rhinoceros General



I was recently told that in Rhinoceros City, in the deep midwest, a progressive hospital had near its front entrance a sign saying "Silence, hospital zone. Do not honk your horn or you will disturb the people making noise inside."

Somewhat incredulous, I went to interview Mr. Lehrkopf, director of the hospital's understaffed (only 2000 clerks) department of Public Disinformation and Mammalian Welfare. I found him busily writing a grant to save the wild rhinoceros in the environs of the sister city of Goma. He flatly denied there was ever such a sign, saying it was unnecessary because under the new union contract people could yell as loud as they wished. Making noise is a right, not a privilege, he explained, but since

hospital employees now wear earphones and listen to rock music while working the issue of honking cars had become irrelevant.

I next interviewed Dr. Grumpus in a noisy bar that reminded him of rounds at the hospital. He told me that it is often difficult to hear what the patients are saying, let alone teach the students. During his ward rounds pagers are constantly beeping, monitors ringing, carts squeaking, and television sets blaring away—several different programs all at once, including one near the bedside of a patient who is comatose. Nurses shout orders, medical students join in the uproar, nursing aids giggle, and a booming overhead loudspeaker summons Dr. Doe for the 17th time.

Then Dr. Grumpus showed me a yellowing file on the effects of noise on hearing, on blood pressure, on patients' health—articles from three continents on noise in operating rooms and pandemonium in hospitals, its effects on cognition and communication, how people react to noise by showing increased aggression and making more errors, also how noise pollution could be reduced by more discipline, better hospital design, quieter alarm systems, and use of noise cancellation technology.

He had it all there, the physiology and the physics, how many decibels are safe, how one study found that 20% of people are "supersensitive" to noise but another 25% "imperturbable." The former included the philosopher Schopenhauer, to whom noise was torture, who compared the intellect to a large diamond, valuable when intact but worthless when smashed into many pieces. Schopenhauer thought that people whose brains were made of coarser matter did not object to noise—largely because they did not think but merely smoked.

All this was splendid but did not answer my question about the sign. So I visited Mr. Livingstone, Rhinoceros General's administrator, in his elegant suite, as he was poring over the budget, an academic affiliation proposal with a nationwide vertically integrated grocery chain, and a fascinating article about "quality health care." No, he said, he had not heard that noise was a problem. No patient had ever complained to him, but then he admitted that for several years he had not actually seen a patient in flesh and blood, only as a budget unit. Moreover, he had recently heard that it was the doctors who made most of the noise.