

## From the History and Archives Collection

Sharon Folkenroth-Hess, M.A.

Collections Manager, Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association

"Healthcare, more than any other profession, undergoes constant change. The rapid progress of science necessitates a continuous revision of the methods and techniques to maintain or restore human health. Practitioners of medicine must stay informed of new developments to offer the best possible care to patients." - Preamble to the Resolution to Form the Delaware Academy of Medicine, 1930.

The technology to facilitate medical education, like healthcare itself, encounters constant change. Since the beginning, the Delaware Academy of Medicine has quickly adopted new tools to keep pace with healthcare and deliver vital new information to professionals and the public. The Delaware Academy of Medicine Historical Archives preserves a collection from a once-revolutionary technology that is now declared obsolete: Tel-Med.

Events like the 1962 Health Fair had 65,000 visitors, and other well-attended health education projects such as the Health Forums demonstrated a need to share medical and dental with the public.<sup>1</sup> Governor Pierre S. du Pont made the first call to Tel-Med in a small press conference on March 31, 1980. The Delaware Academy of Medicine established the State's Tel-Med consumer health program franchise to give the public free and anonymous access to health-related information entirely by telephone. The Tel-Med program was even more popular than the Academy initially planned, receiving nearly 30,000 calls in the first six weeks of operation. By the end of the first year, Tel-Med received over 143,000 calls with an average of 12,000 calls per month (statistically 1 out of every 4 Delawareans), making it one of the most heavily used Tel-Med programs in the country.<sup>2</sup>

When Tel-Med first opened the phone lines, the caller had access to a library of 204 pre-recorded audio tapes on a wide variety of medical and dental topics. Dr. Joyce Brothers and other personalities lent their voices to the appropriate subjects. By 1996 there were 898 topics from which to choose (see figure 1). To select a topic, the caller referred to a number-coded directory printed in the blue pages of the telephone book. A tape librarian would answer the call, enter the topic code into the Teletronix Information System to connect the caller to the requested tape. The Teletronix System integrated telephone and tape playback equipment into a single console allowing a librarian to operate up to fifteen phone lines. According to Teletronix, the system provided a 75:1 ratio of volume, meaning that it would take 75 people to disseminate the same amount of information that one tape librarian can handle.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Tel-Med Topic Directory Flyer

## TEL-MED

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

**TEL-MED IS A SERVICE OF THE DELAWARE ACADEMY OF MEDICINE**

**All tapes are available in both English and Spanish. Tapes for accessibility were designated as expected in a legis.**

**TEL-MED IS AVAILABLE IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH. To hear Spanish tapes, insert a coin after the first number in the code.**

**Consumer Health Information**

**TEL-MED IS AVAILABLE IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH. To hear Spanish tapes, insert a coin after the first number in the code.**

**What is Tel-Med - 400**  
**Major Information - 400**  
**Consumer Health - 400**  
**Urgency - 400**  
**What is Tel-Med - 400**  
**Major Information - 400**  
**Consumer Health - 400**  
**Urgency - 400**  
**What is Tel-Med - 400**  
**Major Information - 400**  
**Consumer Health - 400**  
**Urgency - 400**

## TEL-MED

(800) 794-6565 Kent/Sussex

**The Delaware Academy of Medicine**  
 1922 Loring Avenue  
 Wilmington, DE 19806  
 (800) 247-6717  
<http://www.delmed.org>

**TEL-MED is an automated telephone system of recorded health messages. It is only for health-related information on the medical, dental and other health-related issues listed below. Please dial 671-1010 on your TOUCH-TONE phone and follow the pre-recorded instructions.**

**DO NOT use TEL-MED:**  
 1. In the case of an emergency.  
 2. To replace your doctor or other health care professional.  
 3. To determine if you have a health problem.

**LA-MEDS tapes dispensed on origin / status: include an over dosage for general patients care or to avoid an episode.**

**CONSUMER HEALTH INFO**  
**SAFETY - 000**  
**001 PREVENTION OF SMALLPOX**  
**002 IMPROVING CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**003 CHILD ABUSE**  
**004 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**005 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**006 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**007 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**008 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**009 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**010 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**011 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**012 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**013 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**014 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**015 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**016 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**017 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**018 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**019 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**020 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**021 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**022 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**023 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**024 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**025 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**026 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**027 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**028 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**029 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**030 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**031 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**032 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**033 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**034 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**035 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**036 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**037 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**038 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**039 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**040 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**041 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**042 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**043 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**044 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**045 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**046 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**047 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**048 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**049 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**050 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**051 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**052 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**053 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**054 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**055 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**056 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**057 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**058 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**059 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**060 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**061 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**062 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**063 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**064 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**065 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**066 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**067 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**068 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**069 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**070 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**071 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**072 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**073 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**074 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**075 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**076 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**077 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**078 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**079 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**080 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**081 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**082 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**083 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**084 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**085 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**086 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**087 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**088 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**089 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**090 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**091 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**092 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**093 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**094 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**095 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**096 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**097 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**098 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**099 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**  
**100 CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

**TEL-MED IS AVAILABLE IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH. To hear Spanish tapes, insert a coin after the first number in the code.**

**Consumer Health Information**

**TEL-MED IS AVAILABLE IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH. To hear Spanish tapes, insert a coin after the first number in the code.**

**What is Tel-Med - 400**  
**Major Information - 400**  
**Consumer Health - 400**  
**Urgency - 400**  
**What is Tel-Med - 400**  
**Major Information - 400**  
**Consumer Health - 400**  
**Urgency - 400**  
**What is Tel-Med - 400**  
**Major Information - 400**  
**Consumer Health - 400**  
**Urgency - 400**

This high-tech program was not cheap. A private local foundation gave a grant to the Academy to cover the initial costs for equipment and installation. The Medical-Dental Bureau of New Castle County provided space for the Tel-Med equipment and made available operators staff it around the clock, seven days a week. There was no charge for this service except during heavy calling volume when additional operators were needed. The Academy appealed to both medical and non-medical organizations in the area for assistance with ongoing operating costs. The Medical Society of Delaware, the New Castle County Medical Society, and ten other organizations responded by “sponsoring” 71 more tapes in addition to the 133 unsponsored tapes. In 1983, a second phone number was added to the program to handle Kent and Sussex counties (figure 2).

Figure 2: Governor Pierre S. duPont ready to make the first phone call, Tel-Med Kick-off for Kent General, June 21, 1983.



One of the most appealing features of Tel-Med was its anonymity. Callers had access to information that would answer sensitive questions they might otherwise be too embarrassed to ask. In the first three quarters of 1992 the top five tape requests were: 1) “Am I Really Pregnant?” (requested 2,134 times); 2) “AIDS” (2,054 times); 3) “Signs of a Problem Pregnancy” (1,384 times); 4) “Homosexuality” (1,245 times); and 5) “Facts and Fears about AIDS” (1,181 times) (figure 3). The information in each pre-recorded three to five-minute-long tape was written by physicians or other specialists on that topic. Tel-Med provided each subscribing organization with transcripts for review.

Figure 3: Tel-Med call summary from internal Academy report, 1992.

10/26/92

Tel-Med Summary: \* First Three Quarters 1992

1.	Am I Really Pregnant?	2134			
2.	AIDS	2054			
3.	Signs of a Problem Pregnancy	1384			
4.	Homosexuality	1245			
5.	Facts and Fears About AIDS	1181			
6.	Yeast Infections	1163			
7.	Lyme Disease	1024			
8.	Safe Sex and AIDS	986			
9.	Venereal Warts	965			
10.	Abortion	920			
11.	Vaginitis	850			
12.	Depression	842			
13.	Gonorrhea	796			
14.	Syphilis	759			
15.	... Hidden Diabetic?	740			
16.	Chickenpox	724	4,157	4,305	1.2
17.	Anemia	715			
18.	Diaphragm, Foam ...	714			
19.	Colitis and Bowel Disorders	703			
20.	Teenage Sexuality	698	2,327	2,473	6.3
21.	Cocaine Abuse	696			
22.	Menstruation	691	2,494	2,501	(5.9)
23.	Marijuana	689			
24.	Venereal Diseases	683			
25.	The Rhythm Method	683	2,014	2,195	9.0
26.	What Causes Miscarriages	674			
27.	Hepatitis	668			
28.	Rape	643	2,007	969	(51.7)
29.	Kidney / Urinary Tract Infections	600			
30.	Lupus Erythematosus	599	12,948	12,143	(6.2)
31.	I'm Just Tired, Doctor	595			
32.	Headaches	588			
33.	Endometriosis and Adenomyosis	587			
34.	Lice	581			
35.	Crack Cocaine	549	1,255	939	(25.2)
36.	Unwanted Pregnancy	546	616	903	47.6
37.	Problems at Home?	538			

\*Topics listed here were requested over 200 times in any of the first three quarters of 1992.

Number of Topics	400	420	420	-
Requesting Agencies	31	36	30	-
Average Calls Per Month	9,459	10,480	10,960	4.6
Total Calls Started (1980) =	1,821,790			

Within ten years, the Teletronix system was outdated. In 1991, the Tel-Med program was computerized entirely to handle the nearly 6,000 monthly calls. The Tel-Med Information System (TMIS) was a state-of-the-art system that stored pre-recorded information and delivered messages to a touch-tone caller. By the late 1990s, users could also go to the World Wide Web to retrieve health information from [delamed.org](http://delamed.org) or email [consumer@delamed.org](mailto:consumer@delamed.org). Despite the increasing popularity of the internet in the mid-2000s and the availability of reliable health

information websites like WebMD.com, the Tel-Med system continued to be one of the Academy's most widely-used consumer programs. Ultimately, the internet took over, rendering the Tel-Med system obsolete, and the Academy discontinued the service.

## References

1. Flinn, Dr. R. (1978, Oct 17). *Request for Grant to Crystal Foundation* [Letter to Dr. Burt Pratt].
2. Dill, W. G., & Gill, G. P. (1981, September). Tel-Med in Delaware: A progress report. [Delaware Academy of Medicine Historical Archives.]. *Delaware Medical Journal*, 53(9), 465–466. [PubMed](#)
3. Teletronix Information Systems. (1978, January 24). *Answer to Information Request* [Letter to Eugene Syrovatka]

---

Copyright (c) 2021 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.