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MY father, a pediatrician, kept all his medical equipment in a black leather bag. He used to take it on house calls. My brothers and I would frequently tag along to watch him treat patients. He would remove stitches from over an eye or look into a throat and ears, providing a few pills to start a regimen of antibiotics for an ear infection.

Sometime in the late 1960s, he stopped making house calls. Instead, my father began routinely sending patients to the hospital emergency room.

And he wasn't alone. In 1930, house calls accounted for 40 percent of physician interactions. By 1980, that number had dropped to 1 percent.

But after a half-century, the house call is making a comeback. The available data on house calls are spotty at best. But one study estimated that in 2010, about 4,000 physicians conducted more than two million house calls. Some do what my father did: attend to urgent but not emergency situations, taking care of people with stomach pain, fever, cuts needing stitches and the like. These kinds of urgent-care problems are best treated by a house call, but account for about 40 percent of the nearly 130 million annual visits to emergency rooms.

Companies like Microsoft and Costco provide similar house calls to their employees in the Seattle area. Carena, a private company under contract for the service, sends out doctors or nurse practitioners to assess the situation with the assistance of computer software. The software uses algorithms to help them differentiate between cases that are safe to handle at home and those that require the emergency room.

