

We all went to the optician last week. I rang up and made appointments for the whole family. A couple of days later in we went, one at a time, came out with our prescriptions, signed all the forms, picked our frames and paid up. A week later I called in at lunchtime, collected all the specs, and now we are happy little Harry Potters.

Contrast that with the trip to the dentist. First of all you have to register on the list, and then again a few months later when they lose your details. After many months of waiting you get a letter advising you of your dentist, and telling you to phone for an appointment. So you call them and they confirm they will send you an appointment. A couple of weeks later the letter arrives advising your appointment is for the middle of your holiday. You phone up to change it and they tell you they will send another appointment. The second letter arrives and you book the whole day off work just in case. At every stage you offer the details of your previous dentist so that they can send for your records.

On the day in question you turn up at the wrong reception area, where the smiling receptionist advises you where to go and reassures you that lots of people make the same mistake, without apparently wondering why. After that, all goes well. You are taken on time and everyone is very friendly and professional. Because they have no records for you, they take x-rays and do a thorough check of your mouth. You leave clutching a card for your next appointment. Another smiling receptionist greets you, takes your card and tells you that an appointment date will be sent out in the next week or so.

For a number of reasons I have been dealing with officialdom more than normal recently, from the gift aid registration (you can't download the form, but have to phone the number on the website and they will post you one) to child benefit (four

months after applying, you try to contact them, dialling 14 times before being put on hold for 35 minutes, being told they will not speak to me without my husband's permission only to tell him that 'you will hear in due course').

Everyone is very pleasant and I couldn't fault the individuals I dealt with (except possibly the girl who failed to register us on the NHS dental waiting list, although I am more inclined to blame the computer system she was struggling with). When I mention my frustration with the process, I get sympathy and agreement from the staff along with a resignation that we are all powerless to change it. And I feel powerless too. By the time I fill in all the forms and supply all the evidence required, I don't have the energy to do anything more than moan about it here.

I know someone who is having his own house built. He tried to keep it simple; kit house, straightforward design. Unfortunately his architect ticked a wrong box on the application for planning permission; said he would be on mains water instead of a private supply. The house is now complete and ready to move into just in time for Christmas. But he can't live in it without planning permission. Instead of allowing him to make an amendment to the existing granted permission, for some reason he has to make a brand new application. They even called a special meeting of the planning committee to discuss it. Everyone who knows about these things assure him there is no problem and that he will get the permission. So what exactly is the problem?