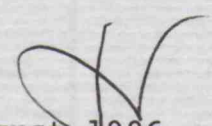


Prime Minister



PRIME MINISTER

4 August 1986

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PATIENTS' CHOICE

The attached lead article from 'Consumer Voice' shows how the Government's consultation document on GPs has won the support of consumer groups. This current of opinion is one which will flow more and more strongly. It is an area of health policy and presentation where we have the initiative.



David Willetts

DAVID WILLETTS

Consumer Voice

How to
make a
complaint
Pull-out action
guide

A journal of consumer news and views National Consumer Council Summer 1986

Do you know if your GP takes a special interest in orthopaedic or alcohol problems? If he or she has a diploma in child health or tropical medicine? Do you know how to get to the practice or whether there is a pharmacist nearby? What is your GP's system for dealing with urgent cases?

Unless you live in Edinburgh you're unlikely to know the answer to these questions other than by accident or experience. But in one part of the Scottish capital this kind of information is now available in a Directory of GP Services.

The Scottish Consumer Council (who carried out this Directory project with the Scottish Association of Local Health Councils and Edinburgh Local Health Council) believes that most people would find such details extremely useful. It provides information which is either not generally or readily available for existing patients of a practice, or for people new to an area who are shopping around for a doctor.

The Directory lists the address of each practice with phone numbers; names of the GPs and their qualifications; whether maternity and contraceptive services are offered; details of premises; bus services to the premises and the nearest pharmacy.

The SCC and Health Councils had discussions with various medical bodies in the run up to preparing the Directory. Many expressed reservations about this initiative on professional services being taken by *patients'* organisations. The Scottish branch of the British Medical Association went so far as to advise its members not to participate in the survey!

Such attitudes have begun to change since the recent publication of the government's paper *Primary Health Care*. Among the proposals specified in the paper is the suggestion that more comprehensive and accessible information about GP practices be produced and made available through surgeries, Family Practitioner Committees, consumer groups and local media. The Edinburgh patients' very favourable reactions to the Directory and their suggested list of over 40 additional items which they would have found useful, shows that such a guide is one practical response to this particular proposal.

The government also suggests ways of measuring the quality of services provided. One way of doing just this would be to ask and listen to the people who use these services. There are plenty of them.

Ministers plan to run a series of meetings to discuss these changes with the professional organisations and with consumer and voluntary bodies. But the important input should come from the individual consumer. You have until December this year to make your points.

BETI WYN THOMAS



Patients' choice

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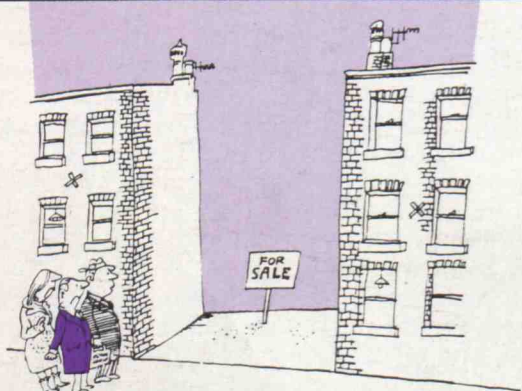
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"Mind you, sir, it needs a bit doing to it."

Grumble

The sting in the tail

Queueing takes all the fun out of consuming. I spend an average of two hours a week standing in line waiting my turn for something or another. If I live out my three score years and ten I will have wasted over 7,000 hours queueing!

While queueing is preferable to a survival-of-the-fittest free-for-all, it is no excuse for a bad queue. When you don't know exactly whose turn is next; when you are uncertain that what you are waiting for is worth the time spent; when you can't relax in case someone sneaks in front of you; when you are bored or made to feel unimportant — that's a bad queue.

My baker is a case in point. He sells wonderful bread, but the mêlée there on a Saturday morning has to be seen to be believed. I have seen stout-hearted shoppers break into tears of bitter frustration. There is a hubbub of muttered accusations and counter-accusations and sometimes open conflict. The reasons are obvious. There aren't enough staff, no effort is made to manage the queue and there isn't another decent baker for miles.

Napoleon described Britain as 'a nation of shopkeepers'. He couldn't have been more wrong. We are a nation of queue standers. According to friends who have been there, the only other country that wastes so much of its people's time queueing is the Soviet Union. Perhaps it demonstrates that the British and the Russians have the virtue of patience in abundance. But is it a virtue? Recently, I heard Professor Laurie Taylor say that patience was a minor form of despair. If that is the case then queueing must be a minor form of institutionalised despair.

In my experience the worst queues are at the post office, the bank, the supermarket and the doctor's surgery. At the post office or the bank, the terrible decision is which line to join to avoid getting stuck behind someone who takes ages to transact their business.

At the supermarket, how can you guarantee that you will not get behind someone who has inadvertently picked up a can of beans which has not been properly price-stamped? Or where the trainee cashier cannot accept a cheque until it has been counter-signed by the supervisor who has just gone missing?

Doctors' surgeries breed paranoia. Why is it that there are always people who arrive after you who get called

before you? And when you have made an appointment, why is it that there always seem to be about 20 other people there for the same time?

If we *must* queue then we consumers have a right to demand that fair play and justice are done — and are *seen* to be done. The organisation and management of queues reflects the esteem with which we consumers are held by the providers of goods and services. Bad queues are an insult.

Some efforts have been made by the post office and banks to deal with the problem. Some now provide single queueing where we all stand in a carefully roped-off aisle, thus avoiding gambling away our time getting in a queue behind a time-consuming customer.

One way to get the supermarkets to buck up their ideas might be to have some way of getting a time check when you join a queue. If you have to wait for more than five minutes you will automatically get 5% knocked off your bill and if more than ten minutes there's a 10% reduction — and so on. This seems only fair and it might also persuade the supermarkets to ensure that enough checkouts are staffed, the goods are always priced properly, and supervisors readily at hand to countersign cheques.

Yet, we consumers have more power than we realise. A woman in front of me in a supermarket abandoned a full trolley when she had been kept waiting more than ten minutes and her very young child was getting rather fractious. When I explained to a passing member of staff he looked very crestfallen and said 'my God! It will take me ages to put all that lot back on the shelves'. Aha, I thought, this may be the answer!

Perhaps we get the queues we deserve. The shops and services which impose too much on our time count on our apathy. If enough of us complain quietly, but firmly, that our time is valuable and that the conditions we experience in queueing are unacceptable then may be the message will get through. If there is no response then where we can, we *must* take our custom elsewhere. Where we can't, we must make our complaints known to a higher authority. Queueers of the world rebel you have nothing to lose but your patience!

JOHN WARD

Coming Soon: a full scale attack on queueing from chairman **Michael Montague** in this year's NCC annual report