

Today the tap was mended

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It was such a small thing but the time it took you would not believe.

We dentists have the reputation of liking nothing better than to roll up our sleeves at the first sign of trouble and get stuck into a problem, preferably of a fiddly and challenging nature that has foiled everyone else. But sometimes, just sometimes, even our best endeavours are scotched by forces over which we seemingly have no control.

You will be familiar with the situation. A tap breaks. Not a highly sophisticated outlet valve aperture assembly on the exit system breakout module of an electronically controlled frequency assemblage unit. Nor a tiny stopcock-like device in an awkward, unreachable-without-skinning-your-knuckles-on-the-way-round type of place. No, a tap. Just an ordinary tap, the sort Americans call faucets that sits 'sink-side' and lets water out when you turn it. Except that this time it didn't, it snapped off in the dental nurse's hand and since it was five to five on a Friday evening and she was trying very hard to get finished in time for the weekend you believed her.

Not to worry. Lovely. You rolled up your sleeves, looked thoughtfully at the broken part and pondered. It was a fairly uninspiring acrylic top and the inside tube-shaped bit that gripped onto the metal of the tap itself had fractured. No problem you thought, reaching for the acrylic repair kit, you'd have it fixed in a twinkling. The staff left for the weekend.

By half past eight the wretched thing still wouldn't stay on and grip. You were hungry and angry that it wouldn't let itself be fixed, wouldn't yield to your superior logic. So you went home to eat and even the dog couldn't understand why you were so grumpy on a Friday night. Saturday was spent searching DIY superstores, plumbing departments thereof, for that little 'tubey' bit. Whole new taps, yes of course but what a waste for a millimetre or three of plastic, hardly environmentally-friendly to dump that much metal. Whole new tops, yes of course but not matching yours so no point in that either. Depression. Sunday passed in deep contemplation as to what to do next.

The team was surprised first thing Monday that you hadn't fixed it. Usually you did, they remarked, which should really have pleased you but the silver pointy bit of the tap sticking up taunted you like an irritant relative on a wet afternoon at a family celebration.

It was when he asked what colour the top was and you said 'blue' and he said that it couldn't be one of theirs then, that your confidence started to ebb.

Reluctantly you rang directory enquiries to get the number of the manufacturer. On answering, the brusque Monday morning telephonist informed you that the firm had been taken over three years ago and was now called something Belgian-sounding but she'd put you through to a customer service operative called Cliff as soon as his line was free. Cliff didn't sound especially Belgian but patiently listened to your story right through before deciding that Barry would be a better man to answer this one as he used to work for the manufacturers before the continental corporate swoop had descended.

Barry had sounded reassuringly like a man in a brown warehouse coat with his top pocket straining with the burden of years' worth of half-used ballpoint pens. It was when he asked what colour the top was and you said 'blue' and he said that it couldn't be one of theirs then, that your confidence started to ebb. Then he said that it could be dark navy but only if it had

six sides on the gripper flute. You counted. It definitely had five. He still insisted that it was not one of theirs then.

Mrs Staples was getting het-up in reception at being kept waiting but you pushed on, determined to get this sorted out, however long it took. 'How' you had tried to keep your calm, 'was it possible' that it was not one of Barry's if it had the manufacturer's name encrusted on the top?

Barry was clearly doing his best, the plastic tops of his ballpoints catching in the telephone cord as he wriggled in perplexity. 'Wait a minute,' you imagined him suddenly reeling backwards with a mastermind-like stroke of revelation, 'is it clear acrylic with a central pinion allocation slot abutting a mechanical grip overshank?' You thought it just could be. 'Well I never,' Barry sighed but was obviously smiling, 'I'll bet it's a GF27a.'

What a relief, here at last a fellow who appreciated the value of nomenclature, had a sensitivity for the finer detail of mechanical parts, a nostalgia almost for getting it right. 'Yes,' you conceded, 'that must be it, a GF27a. Could you send me a new one please?'

Barry then struck a terrible further blow. He would like to but he couldn't. They stopped making them about eight years ago. 'Why, oh why, oh why?' you wailed, out of despair rather than anger. 'Simple' he replied, 'they kept breaking.'

The practice manager was just entering anyway to say that she had managed to placate Mrs Staples so far but she couldn't say how long it would last, when you stopped her in her tracks and asked her to call an emergency plumber urgently.

At home that night your partner asked how the tap was. 'Oh,' you said as nonchalantly as you could, 'today the tap was mended.' The dog snuffled at your feet and you quietly cursed the day that the GF27a was ever invented.

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