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NUMBER'S UP FOR GP PHONES RIP-OFF



Phone boss... Riley

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GP surgeries still using rip-off phonedines now have no excuse.

Although the Department of Health banned expensive 0844 and 0845 lines for NHS services three years ago,

Surgeries can switch deals

more than 900 surgeries who use them for appointments say they have been forced to continue because they are locked into long-term contracts.

Now, in a victory for campaigners, Britain's biggest provider of automated

GP phonedines, Surgery Line, has allowed family doctors to amend their contracts, letting them to switch to cheaper 03 numbers free of charge.

Calling a surgery on an 0844 or 0845 line costs up to 41p a minute from a mobile and 5p a minute from a BT landline.

Last month Surgery Line, headed by millionaire businessman Matthew Riley from TV's *The Apprentice*, announced it would stop selling the high-cost phonedines to GP and dentist surgeries.

The move came after a Sunday Mirror investigation found that patients calling to make an appointment can be kept waiting for up to 30 minutes... costing almost £12 for a single call.

INCOME

David Hickson of the Fair Telecoms Campaign, which fights for consumer rights, said: "The fact that GPs can now change their number without waiting until the end of their contracts removes the only defence they have for this unacceptable practice."

He urges all GPs still using 0844 and 0845 phonedines to switch to cheaper-rate numbers at once.

Surgeries get some of the income generated by the calls, although doctors insist they do not make a profit and that the revenue is spent on installing and operating the systems.

Probe into 0844 'tax on needy'

WATCHDOGS have ordered an inquiry into high-cost government phonedines.

It comes after Labour MP John Healey gave the National Audit Office evidence of the huge scale of what he calls the government's "telephone tax" claiming the hard-up are charged "rip-off rates".

The Department of Transport has made £2.5million from the phonedines in the past three years.

Nearly two-thirds of departments and agency helplines are 0844 or 0845 numbers. Calls cost up to 41p per minute from mobiles.

In a letter to Mr Healey, audit office boss Amyas Morse said: "We will assess why higher-rate numbers are preferred to geographic rate or freephone numbers."

