

COMPLAINT TO AN INDUSTRY SUPERANNUATION FUND RE HANDLING OF A CLAIM FOR DEATH BENEFIT

This is a summary of the formal complaint to 'FUND' about their handling of the death benefit claim for my daughter, who died suddenly last year in London aged thirty one. A full copy has been forwarded to the Productivity Commission In Confidence.

The claim was subject to insensitive handling; errors resulting from a lack of attention to detail on the part of a number of staff; persistent use of 'snail mail' when email was a valid alternative and subsequent delays resulting from the cumulative impact of all these factors.

The documentation was originally sent by post, which was expected to take 2-3 weeks. When requested a second time, the same documentation was emailed. This delay of three weeks could have been avoided by forwarding the documents by email in the first place. I understand that some claimants may prefer printed documents to be forwarded, but many may prefer to avoid the inevitable delays this causes and have documentation forwarded by email. On several occasions documents were emailed. There appeared to be no consistency in this.

Recommendation 1: Claimants are asked at the first opportunity how they would prefer to receive their documentation.

Unfortunately several officers demonstrated a lack of attention to detail, and at times a repeated lack of attention to detail. One call centre officer left a reference to a deceased person unknown in the text of the email when emailing out the requested forms, whilst another appears to have misheard the name of the deceased's father and noted it incorrectly in the case notes. This error could have been avoided if the case manager had checked the certified birth certificate of the deceased member, which had previously been provided. The lack of attention to detail actually increased the work for the case manager and other staff, as well as us, the claimants.

Recommendation 2: Adequate quality control and quality assurance measures are in place to ensure that errors do not occur when using standard correspondence templates, which undoubtedly provide efficiencies when used properly.

Recommendation 3: Staff are trained to understand the importance of primary documents and to refer to them.

A claim relating to the sudden death of a young person is quite different in many ways to the management of a claim for finalisation of superannuation payments. Whilst both require attention to detail and to the requirements of the relevant legislation, it is my view that that handling of a claim for death benefit, as in this case, requires a higher level of sensitivity on the part of the case manager in particular. This was not always evident in the approach of the case manager. On several occasions her lack of attention to detail caused pain and delay – for example when the case manager called and asked to speak with the deceased person. I found her attitude to be one of high-handedness as demonstrated by another call when she alleged the father of the deceased, had completed the incorrect form when in fact the form had not been prepared correctly by her before and included a reference to a person unknown as the deceased's father.

Recommendation 4: Staff allocated to sensitive cases have adequate training in the skills required to do this well.

Finally the decision made by the Trustee was to award the benefit in equal parts to the deceased's mother who was the person nominated as the beneficiary by the deceased, and her father, named incorrectly. Whilst I understand that this decision may technically be in keeping with the relevant legislation it is faulty in two respects. Firstly it overrides the deceased's stated nomination of the beneficiary as her mother. If the nomination of a beneficiary is to be so readily overruled by the Trustee, and on the basis of no evidence of an interdependent relationship with another person, then it should be made very clear in any advertising material that a binding nomination should be completed by a potential member.

Secondly the name of the father was incorrect. Whilst this error was later corrected it does beg the question of what documents the Trustee referred to and actually demonstrates the lack of evidence on which this decision was based. Repeated requests for a 'Statement of Reasons' or 'Decision Record' for the Trustee's decision have not been forthcoming.

It is my view that the Trustee had no evidence before him/her that demonstrated an ongoing interdependent relationship between the deceased, who was living overseas at the time of her death (as evidenced by the certified copy of the Death Certificate provided) and her (misnamed) father. It seems that the expectation is for the named beneficiary/beneficiaries to provide evidence to the contrary disputing the Trustee's decision and staking their claim. This would further prolong the process and could cause further grief. Whilst this was not the situation in our case as we agreed to concur with the Trustee's decision, once the name of the father had been corrected, the decision making process does lack transparency and accountability. In my view, this is not best practice for an organisation such as this.

Recommendation 5: A decision record is made available to all beneficiaries outlining the reasons for the Trustee's decision.

In my view the cumulative impact of all these factors does not reflect well on the culture or practices of the organisation. The process was more extended than it needed to be, there was a general disregard for accuracy and the sensitivity of the case. As I said in my letter of complaint to the Client Service Manager (14/2/2018), no amount of money will compensate for the loss of our daughter, she will never again walk through the front door, but to have this claim managed as it was is extremely unhelpful. Sadly there was a further error even after this and the apology that was forthcoming from the case manager did not include those made by others. A lack of response from the Client Service Manager again demonstrates a culture that does not value the client/claimant, nor does it acknowledge the sensitivity of a case such as this. Furthermore there was yet another error resulting from a lack of attention to detail on the part of the case manager (2/03/2018) indicating that nothing had changed in this respect.