

Expenses

“How do I apply for expenses?” I asked one of the secretaries. The Royal Gwent Hospital was so far from home that I had been forced to rent one of their spartan on-site rooms in order to avoid a crippling three hour round trip each day. The only problem was the rent itself was 10% of my take-home pay and I was starting to feel the financial strain.

“Expenses?” She said, in such a way as to suggest that I was perhaps a dangerous maverick out on a mission for even contemplating applying.

“Why yes,” I said, a little more uncertainly. “For my accommodation. Is there a form?”

“You want to claim expenses?” The secretary said again. I nodded, and the room erupted into joyful whooping, laughter and general merriment as all the secretaries rolled around at the mere thought of the whole thing. “I can give you the form, but most people give up,” she said. Another secretary, about to leave for the waiting list office, assured me that I would fail in my quest.

Having been brought up in a mildly socialist manner and not too averse to a challenge, I filled out the form and defiantly handed it back for processing. The secretary assured me that the expenses department would beat me but I grinned in what I thought was a winning manner and dared them to try.

Two months later, having heard nothing, I called the expenses department and was told they had no trace of my form. I filled in another one, copied it and sent it back. They then lost that one again and tried to claim that the 90 day deadline for claiming was now up, but triumphantly I produced the copy, copied that and sent that back to them. It felt like a high powered war games strategy from the Cold War era. So far all the moves had been predictable. Perhaps too predictable.

Six months later, still nothing. The expenses team now finally had my form but were debating whether it should be paid or not. I sent them a copy of the expenses policy that they themselves had sent me, highlighting the correct paragraphs. There was still some debate apparently and they would get back to me. When they inevitably had not gotten back

to me I began to doubt for the first time that things would work out. As I continued to hand new forms for subsequent months to the secretary, followed by copies of those as the first ones inevitably went missing, I was congratulated on my perseverance. Every single other registrar had given up with expenses by now but not me; I was locked in a mental duel to the death.

Some expenses started to trickle through. Not the whole amounts naturally but some portion, and I was beginning to feel that the dam would soon break and I would receive all that was due. “Anything yet?” I would be asked every payday by my friends the secretaries. “A little, but it’ll come,” I’d ritualistically reply.

I sensed the expenses staff becoming more hostile toward me during my regular phonecalls and was told after a few months that they had started a new system for managing queries.

“You can’t call us direct any more. You have to call the new helpdesk.”

“But why? You know me and I know you well. We’ve been discussing these expenses for months and they are still unpaid.”

“What’s your helpdesk reference number then?” I was stumped by this and after a short harrumph of triumph the expenses officer went on. “That’s why they’re not being paid. You have no helpdesk reference number. You need to call the helpdesk for a reference number.”

“And then what? Will they sort it out better than you?”

“They will give you a reference number. Then they will email me telling me you’ve called.”

“And then?”

“And then I will call you back so we can sort out your expenses.”

I started to feel for the first time that I would lose. Like Kafka’s land surveyor in *The Castle*, destined to die in the village. Or in my case, not get my expenses paid.

One day, however, the expenses officer seemed happy to hear from me as I called her up for the eighth millionth time. “Good news!” she said. My heart rate picked up as I became unreasonably hopeful. “The expenses policy has changed and it will be the head of Human Resources (HR) dealing with these types of expenses now.”

“So how is that good?”

“It’s good because it now has nothing to

do with me!” True to her word, it was then nothing to do with her and everything to do with the head of HR, who as it turned out was leaving that day on a three week holiday. He would be arriving back shortly before I was due to leave the posting, with expenses from eight months previously still unpaid. As I repeatedly crashed my head against the tabletop and the secretaries roared with laughter I vowed not to give up and chase it to the end.

To be fair the head of HR was unexpectedly good in his task and approved the forms, copies of which had had to be sent yet again, ready for final processing by my old friends at the expenses team. I told the secretaries this and gloated too quickly that I had won. I had beaten the castle authorities. I might even have danced a little in the secretarial office and hugged my secretarial friend, back from the waiting list office, who seemed confused and somewhat bewildered that somebody had had expenses paid. It was a moment of paradigm shift. Checking my email later that day I noticed one from the expenses officer. I chanced a grin as to what it might say. Would it be an apology? Would it be some kind of compensation for everything I had been through? Would it simply be a ‘well done for doing what so few have done’ kind of email? Alas, it was an email telling me that due to a ceiling on payable expenses that she had so helpfully recently discovered, my claims, whilst approved, could not be paid in their entirety. I would be getting a bonus prize of 25% of what had been claimed but no jackpot. And it was then that I knew for sure what cleverer people had known from the start. The secretaries are always right; and you never, ever, ever get your full expenses paid.

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