

# Letter to the editor

## *Serious warning*

Recently my wife and I used an agency to go to Ireland to work there and learnt a very expensive lesson. It was an obvious mistake we made, but one that is so easy to make. It cost us R25 000 excluding accommodation and food.

My reason for this warning is that in this day and age it is getting more difficult for South African doctors, especially junior doctors, to work overseas. As we do not have the knowledge of how a foreign country's health system works, we rely on agencies to assist us in working abroad.

The easiest way to explain this would be by telling our story.

We started working with a small UK-based agency with a contact in Somerset West, recruiting South African doctors. Within a week they organised me an A+E registrar position in Cork for May and June. On 23 March, about 5 weeks before starting, I couriered all my relevant paperwork to the agency's office in London for the work permit application, which they said they promptly posted to the hospital. They informed us that it should take 5 - 6 weeks before the work permit would be ready, advised us to purchase our airline tickets and assured us that even if my work permit was not ready, we should not have any problems entering into Ireland as they were busy changing the process of work permit applications.

It sounded illogical to enter into a country without a work permit, but why should I not believe my agent? Is it not their job to place doctors in Ireland? They should know best. When working abroad previously our agents took care of all the necessary paperwork. Alarm bells should have gone off when they advised me, after purchasing the tickets, to tell passport control that we are coming into Ireland on holiday.

We flew into Heathrow, where the questioning began. I told passport control the truth, as lying to them is a criminal

offence and could lead to permanent deportation. After 4 hours on the airport on a Sunday morning, Irish immigration decided to give us a 2-week holiday permit for Ireland to sort out my work permit. This is when we discovered that the work permit application process had already changed in February.

The hospital informed us that I couldn't start working until I had my work permit, but seeing that all my paperwork had been sent 5 weeks previously, I expected my work permit to be ready any day. We ended up waiting for 2 weeks with no success. Luckily we could stay with friends and family, otherwise it could have cost us at least €1 000 more.

During this time the agent continued offering me jobs without addressing the original issue of acquiring a work permit. His initial solution to the problem was to leave Ireland and return as visitors and work without a work permit. (Take into account that we already had a 2-week stamp in our passports for the purpose of acquiring a work permit.) Then he advised us to enter into Northern Ireland and cross the border via road to avoid passport control. I continually had to remind him that it would be illegal for me to work in Ireland without a work permit. His last attempt was that one of the smaller towns apparently still followed the old process of work permit application (basically the local police gives you a work permit stamp), but this proved to be unsuccessful.

In the end we decided to phone the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (we had not done this before as our agent said they had been contacted and nothing could be done to speed up the process). The Department had no record of my name on their system, implying that there is no record of my application...

We flew back to South Africa.

In my view the agency should have advised us to wait for my work permit before leaving South Africa. Once again

this sounds obvious, but if your agent advises otherwise, why should you doubt him? When we wrote the agency a letter of grievance afterwards, they claimed that they warned us about all the risks, a conversation I do not recall, especially seeing that I am a very cautious person and with those warnings would not have bought airline tickets. The agency should have been up to date with the new process of work permit application. It is their job after all. It is their responsibility to follow up on the work permit application, to ensure that it has been received and that it is being processed.

My advice would be:

- Talk to other people who have worked with an agency before you decide to work through them. When we subsequently spoke to other doctors who worked through the same agency, they all had complaints about it.
- Phone the consulate of the country you want to go to and find out exactly what you need, or just 'Google it'.
- Never buy your airline tickets until you have all your paperwork, regardless of what your agency says.
- Remember that not telling the full truth to passport control is a criminal offence which could lead to permanent deportation - keep in mind that it is you and not your agent who gets deported.
- The Department of Health is a government institution and will not allow you to work without a work permit.

Finally, I have one last piece of advice: Agents are ruthless and their first interest is themselves and the money they earn, not their clients.

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