Liz and I share the same bank account and have a pre-set "no questions asked" amount we can spend. When you're sharing money, it's really important to have the freedom to spend money on whatever you want.

Beside, I'm sure some of his expenses wouldn't fit your idea of necessary, either. "My shout, boys!"

Shout-out to the heroes

Toni says: I do not have a question, but I just wanted to thank you for your support of financial counsellors.

The Barefoot Investor for Families: The Only Kids' Money Guide You'll Ever Need (HarperCollins) RRP $29.95

They are the heroes of humanity in the financial sector. You have a big following and an influential voice, and it is a credit to you that you use it to give a financial shout-out to the people who willingly take on the giants of financial bullying. A financial counsellor helped my parents in a way that I could never express thanks for — and that counsellor goes home with a pay packet that could never express her worth.

Barefoot responds: I'm hoping one recommendation from the royal commission is that more money is made available to get more financial counsellors on the ground. The banks make a lot of money, yet it's the financial counsellors who mop up a lot of their mess. Fingers crossed.

OMG moment hits way too close to home

Noel Whittaker

THE aged-care system in Australia is one of the most complicated in the world.

And the difficulty in interpreting its maze of rules and regulations is creating hell for people at one of the most vulnerable times of life.

A great example is the drama that occurs on the day a family receives what aged-care guru Rachel Lane calls an "OMG letter".

This applies to homeowners who have entered aged care.

In calculating the cost of your aged care, your home is an exempt asset if a protected person is living there. A protected person includes your spouse or dependent child, a carer who has been living there for at least two years who is eligible for an Australian income support payment, or a close relative who has been living there for at least five years and who qualifies for an income support payment.

If there is no protected person living there, the home is assessed up to a capped value of $165,271.

But the rules are different from an age pension perspective. In Centrelink's view, your home is an exempt asset as long as you or your spouse lives there. It will start being assessed two years from when the last one of you leaves. You don't need to have a protected person (or in fact anyone) living in the home for the two-year exemption to apply.

So, what is the dreaded OMG letter? It's the one you get from Centrelink or the Department of Veterans Affairs when the two years is up. It will advise you your former home is now included in your pension assets test and you are now not considered a home owner. It will also let you know your new pension entitlement, which is often zero.

The letter typically arrives a matter of days before the pension is cancelled: confused and panicked people exclaim, "Oh my God!"

Imagine the confusion and stress felt by a protected person such as a child who has been living in the home for many years and was told when mum or dad entered aged care the house would be exempt for the entire time the protected person was living in it. While that is correct from an aged-care perspective, it is not correct for Centrelink.

But if you get the OMG letter today, it means you entered aged care in 2016 (or earlier), before changes to the pension assessment of the home and rent on January 1, 2017. People who entered aged care before this date are in the unique position of being able to keep and rent their former home with the asset and income (rent) being exempt from their pension entitlement indefinitely.

To have these special exemptions apply, you must be paying towards your aged-care accommodation by daily payment and renting the house out. The rent doesn't need to be at commercial rates, or on an arms-length basis. You can rent the home to a child or grandchild for a nominal amount, but you do have to rent the home out.

Rent from the home will be included in the aged-care means test, unless you entered care before January 1, 2016 (and meet the above criteria).

Whether you should sell your home, or keep it and possibly rent it, will depend on a range of factors, including your estate planning wishes, cash flow, tax consequences, and, of course, your ability to meet the cost of care.

Keep in mind that the special rules that apply to the family home are unique to that asset, so make sure you take expert advice before you decide what to do. A mistake could be very costly.

Noel Whittaker is the author of *Making Money Made Simple* and other books on personal finance. His advice is general in nature and readers should seek their own professional advice before making any financial decisions.

ASK THE EXPERT

Send your questions to Noel Whittaker **noelwhit@gmail.com** or tweet **@NoelWhittaker**

Q Can I move my $50,000 in superannuation to a managed fund and start salary sacrificing to that fund?

A Unless you have reached an age where you can access your superannuation you cannot withdraw the money and invest it in a managed fund. However, you can switch the money presently held in superannuation to a growth option within your existing fund, if the fund has such an option, or you could roll the money from your present fund to a new fund that has the bells and whistles you are looking for. You can only salary sacrifice to superannuation.

Opening up about productivity shut-downs

WORKPLACE MATTERS

Gary Martin

CAST your mind back to a time when the office was a set of rooms or cubicles that provided a quiet place for workers to concentrate, write and speak on the phone.

The more senior the boss, the bigger the office, though in those days almost everyone had their own four walls.

Then the walls came down, giving birth to the open-plan office with promises of greater collaboration and camaraderie, better communication and enhanced productivity.

It's been almost two decades since the walls were torn down in earnest, with many workers confessing they have felt like lab rats in one of the biggest and longest workplace experiments of our time.

At first glance, open-plan offices appear to have many advantages. They generally use less floor space for each employee, so financial benefits are realised. But for many, the true benefits are attributable to the way in which co-workers are able to adopt more effective ways of working together.

Success in the modern workplace is often measured by how well workers collaborate. Open-plan offices appear to provide increased opportunities for employees to work together in a seamless fashion. And many working in open-plan offices report there is usually a less hierarchical structure, which allows employees from all levels — junior to more senior — to work together effectively in a single space.

Yet not all is rosy when it comes to open-plan offices.

When many co-workers work closely in one big area, the resultant noise can impact on an employee's capacity to concentrate. This problem can be exacerbated when deadlines are tight and pressure is mounting to complete a project.

It may well be one of the reasons why so many open-plan office workers choose to work from home when they have deadlines looming.

And in worst-case scenarios, some employees report that open-plan offices can cause some co-workers to withdraw socially, avoid face-to-face interactions and to turn to email or electronic devices to communicate with their colleagues.

In introducing open-plan offices, it appears employers may have become too enthusiastic about opportunities for increased collaboration, which have come at the expense of concentration and privacy.

Enter open-plan offices Mark II, the more modern office layouts that capitalise on the strengths of the traditional open-plan office while reducing its weaknesses.

Ironically, one of the strengths of the new open-plan office is it provides opportunities to retreat from it. Think open work spaces, but add into the mix lounge areas, sound-proofed private work booths, standing desks, meeting rooms and designated social areas.

Of course, for those trapped in the first version of the open-plan office — without the new bells and whistles — seeking your employer's permission to work at home when deadlines are looming might still be the best option.

Professor Gary Martin is chief executive at the Australian Institute of Management WA