

Scammers con real estate agent into selling house

Ashlee Mullany | The Sunday Times | September 11, 2010 2:03PM

A PERTH real estate agent has sold an investment property without the owner's knowledge. Roger Mildenhall, 64, was living in South Africa when his \$485,000 Perth property was sold in June by someone posing as him.

Police have told him the money is gone and he may not see a cent of it, in a case that has raised fresh fears over the ease of identity theft.

And in a bitter twist, the building contractor may still have to pay thousands of dollars in capital gains tax.

Mr Mildenhall returned to Perth last week after hearing about the sale of his Karrinyup duplex, only to discover his second investment property in Wembley Downs was also in the process of being sold by scammers.

He managed to stop the sale but said the locks had already been changed on the home and cleaners had been contracted to prepare the home for its new owners.

The illegal sale of his Karrinyup property meant he had lost his retirement fund, he said.

“It's something you read about in books but you would never expect it to happen to you,” Mr Mildenhall said.

“When my neighbours told me on the phone I thought they were pulling my leg. I thought they were having a joke.”

It is understood the Karrinyup home was put on the market after a series of emails were sent to the agent asking for the home to be sold due to financial hardship.

Mr Mildenhall said officers from the Major Fraud Squad told him their initial investigations indicated the scammers were originally from Nigeria.

“This was my retirement fund, this was my nest egg,” the building contractor said. “I lived in Australia for 40 years and worked hard.”

Mr Mildenhall said he would now try and recoup the losses from the companies involved with the sale. He said the real estate agency was Hagen & Co in Woodlands, while the settlement agency was Progressive Settlements, also based in Woodlands. He had dealt with both agencies previously.

Hagen & Co director Gail Curtis declined to comment yesterday, while attempts to contact Progressive Settlements were not successful.

Mr Mildenhall said: “It wasn't even my signature on the letter of acceptance, it was just like a five-year-old had written out my name in block letters. And yet the settlement agency didn't even turn a hair, they just accepted it.

“I've got lots of questions because due diligence (by the real estate and settlement agents) wasn't shown. There were several things that should not have happened without me - the real me - activating the sale.

“The person in the street does not realise that their records are so readily available. The rules of disclosure and identity have shown to be lapse. If it happened to me then surely it's going to happen again.”

Consumer Protection Commissioner Anne Driscoll said real estate agents and settlement agents had been sent urgent bulletins warning them of the scam.

“Clearly real estate agents need to take every precaution to ensure they are selling a property on behalf of the rightful owner by demanding proof of identification like a driver licence or passport,” Ms Driscoll said.

In light of the case, she said agents should check title deeds and ask for evidence of a mortgage being paid for a property.

An investigation involving the Real Estate and Business Agents Supervisory Board and Settlement Agents Supervisory Board is underway.