

Bullying claim made in slug case

Michael Fowler

A whistleblower has accused a council in Melbourne's south-east of operating "under a culture of corruption and bullying" over its role in the shutdown of a catering company accused of infecting an elderly woman with listeria.

The former environmental health inspector detailed an incident in which she observed a colleague at Greater Dandenong Council editing a photo that depicted a slug in the kitchen, which the caterer alleges was planted by the council worker to justify closing it for a month in February 2019.

In the most telling development of the "slug gate" controversy that caused I Cook Foods in Dandenong to allegedly lose millions of dollars in



The slug in dispute.

revenue, the chair of the parliamentary inquiry, Reason Party MP Fiona Patten, said: "We've all become quite confident that [that photo] was doctored."

The allegations of evidence tampering come as police continue to investigate the I Cook Foods closure.

A spokeswoman for Dandenong Council said it "vehemently denies what is alleged and looks forward to being able to refute that allegation

when it presents to the parliamentary committee next week".

I Cook Foods was closed in February 2019 after 86-year-old Jean Painter died while a patient at Knox Private Hospital having been diagnosed with listeriosis. Signing off on the shutdown, Brett Sutton, who at the time was acting chief health officer, said the infection was linked to sandwiches provided by I Cook Foods. Owner Ian Cook denies the claims and is suing Dandenong Council and the health department for more than \$50 million in damages.

Kim Rogerson, an environmental health officer with Dandenong Council until 2019, told the inquiry yesterday that she had been pressured by the authority into amending her reports to portray I Cook Foods as an

unsanitary workplace. She said images taken in the kitchen were taken out of context to justify 96 criminal charges against the caterer, for example, photographing broken equipment set to be thrown out then falsely claiming it was in use. The 96 charges were later dropped.

Since 2019 Mr Cook has claimed that Dandenong Council targeted his business because the council and chief executive, John Bennie, were stakeholders in a rival catering company in the area, Community Chef.

Claiming the slug was planted, Mr Cook has cited CCTV images showing council worker Elizabeth Garlick standing for 17 seconds in the corner of the kitchen where the slug was later photographed. Backing up this claim, Ms Rogerson told the inquiry she was two metres away from Ms

Garlick's desk when she began editing an image of the slug to remove traces of the tissue paper that it had allegedly been carried in.

Ms Rogerson noticed a red circle around the tissue, "which I believed to be some kind of cropping tool". When she asked what they were doing, another council worker said "just cleaning it up". Ms Rogerson said: "I have been away from the City of Greater Dandenong for over two years now, and only now do I feel safe to say that Dandenong Council operates under a culture of corruption and bullying."

Ray Christy, the food auditor tasked with inspecting Knox Private Hospital, told the inquiry he was "unequivocally certain the patient did not eat sandwiches prepared by I Cook Foods".