

Police re-open 'slug' case

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Victoria Police has re-opened its investigation of allegations of a corrupt compulsory shutdown of Dandenong South-based caterer I Cook Foods.

ICF has claimed its 30-year-old business was improperly closed as part of a health department investigation into a hospital patient's death in early 2019.

The two-year public stoush has been branded 'slug-gate', including an allegation that a council food inspector planted a live slug on the factory floor.

It has led to a Parliamentary inquiry, and the launch of a \$50 million civil lawsuit by ICF against the Department of Health and Greater Dandenong Council.

As a result of the shutdown, the business was destroyed and 41 employees lost their jobs, ICF claims.

In April, Chief Commissioner Shane Patton ordered a review into Casey CIU's initial nine-month investigation that found "no criminal charges" against the council or health department.

The review has "determined that further investigation is required into the matter," a police spokesperson said on 4 June.

ICF director Ian Cook had called on Mr Patton to "personally intervene", claiming the initial investigation was "derailed by political interference".

He said he was "very pleased" that police re-opened the case.

"It's important for us and it's important for



Ian Cook and son Ben Cook outside Dandenong Magistrates' Court in 2019, with alleged evidence of a planted slug.

everyone else in Dandenong.

"If they get away with this, there's no food business safe in Greater Dandenong.

"Justice has to be done, it has to be seen to be done and people have to be brought to account for this."

The allegations have been constantly denied by Greater Dandenong Council.

A Greater Dandenong Council spokesperson said the council "welcomes the opportunity to participate in a fair and thorough investigation".

"(The council) remains extremely confident an investigation will clear it of any wrongdoing.

"We have not yet been contacted regarding the Victoria Police decision to reopen the investigation, but we will continue to cooperate fully."

Prior to the Casey CIU case, a police investigator wrote in a leaked briefing note that it was evident to him "a level of corruption, misuse of office and a malicious prosecution" were involved.

In June 2020, Detective Sergeant Ash Penry, of Greater Dandenong CIU, stated that he'd formed the view that the "prosecution of I Cook Foods was malicious" and its shutdown was "unlawful".

A statement by former council employee and whistleblower Kim Rogerson depicted a "workplace intent on destroying I Cook Foods", he wrote.

Det Sgt Penry recommended that police investigations continue but that Greater Dandenong CIU didn't have the resources and expertise.

The police unit was also conflicted because "Greater Dandenong Council is a key stakeholder", he stated.

ICF had submitted to police a 14-volume brief of evidence with 61 hours of CCTV footage prepared by two retired police detectives, working pro bono.

The detectives expressed shock that council staff weren't even questioned by police, despite a "clear prima facie case".

In August, a Parliamentary inquiry found the ICF closure was "valid" and in accordance with the Food Act, but "not fair".

It did not rule on whether the alleged food safety issues were "adequate to warrant the closure".

In 2019, Greater Dandenong Council laid 96 food-safety charges against ICF – all of which were dropped just before a hearing at Dandenong Magistrates' Court in late 2019.

The council stated it aimed to avoid a legal bill of up to \$1.2 million.