

Slug inquiry is re-opened

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Health department and City of Greater Dandenong officials are expected to front a re-opened state parliamentary inquiry into the 'slug gate' affair.

The new hearings were sparked by fresh questions about the shutdown of the Dandenong South-based caterer I Cook Foods by health authorities in early 2019.

ICF's sandwiches had been linked to the death of a Knox Private Hospital patient.

However, a food safety assessment report by a Knox Council officer recently came to light that stated it was "more than likely" that the patient was eating the hospital's "soft diet" sandwiches without crusts.

These were not prepared by ICF, but by the hospital's kitchen with ingredients from three other suppliers, he stated.

The report appears to have been sent to the state health department hours before it forced ICF to close.

As a result the company lost millions in contracts and destroyed food, and 41 workers lost their jobs.

At the original inquiry in 2020, Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton, who signed the ICF closure order, said the patient only ate food provided by the hospital's "sole" caterer I Cook Foods.

He confirmed that Knox Council undertook a food safety assessment of Knox Private Hospital prior to the decision.

"I had good information that the patient had consumed food supplied by I Cook Foods during her incubation period—so the period from potential consumption of food until becoming unwell—and that I Cook Foods was the only premises where listeria was detected."

In August 2020, the inquiry found ICF's closure was valid but ICF wasn't dealt with fairly or consistently.

Opposition health spokesperson Georgie



Ian Cook has welcomed the re-opening of a parliamentary inquiry into his business's shutdown.

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Crozier said in State Parliament that the 2020 inquiry had been presented with "now very questionable" evidence.

"In fact I am wondering how much contempt of Parliament has actually gone on," she told Parliament.

"Have people actually said something under oath that perhaps did not occur?"

Ms Crozier recently made a freedom-of-information request from Knox Council on the ICF issue.

She told Star Journal she received more than 400 fully redacted pages, with no sign of the council officer's food safety assessment.

"I've got real concerns, as many others have, about the decisions that have been made. What has happened in the Department of Health around the decision to close this business?"

"They knew about some of this evidence and they didn't bring it to light in the inquiry."

Inquiry chair and Reason Party leader Fiona Patten said the Knox report "certainly warrants further inquiry".

"I would be very concerned if there was any misleading of my committee last year."

ICF director Ian Cook welcomed the re-opened inquiry.

"Just when I was about to give up on the system, something like this happens to restore your faith."

Mr Cook said ICF had been fighting two years for the Knox report.

"And the (health department) still won't admit it even exists or that they have it, which we know they do."

"The fact is, they've been hiding this document, which proves my innocence, for two years."

A Department of Health spokesperson did not specifically answer Star Journal's questions on its knowledge of the Knox report.

"Public health decisions are based on a careful analysis of environmental samples, food samples, laboratory results and in this instance, the intended recipients of the food being produced."

The spokesperson said "extensive and detailed" evidence was provided by Professor Sutton and department officials to the parliamentary inquiry.

"As set out in the evidence to the Inquiry, four of the I Cook Foods samples were positive for Listeria and the genetic sequence of these four samples was found to be genetically related to the strain of Listeria monocytogenes found in the deceased patient."

"The genetic sequence in the patient was not closely related to any other food samples in recent years anywhere in Australia."

It was "standard public health practice" to take action when listeria was detected in a food or food manufacturing environment, the spokesperson said.

"The Department makes no apology for putting the health and safety of the community first, especially when it comes to public health."

"According to the distribution list provided by I Cook Foods its customers included hospitals, meals on wheels programs, aged care facilities and food businesses supplying directly to the general public."

"It was important for the public to be alerted."

ICF has steadfastly claimed it was wrongfully closed, including allegations that a Greater Dandenong food inspector planted a live slug on the factory floor.

The business is also suing the council and the department for more than \$50 million.

Recently, Victoria Police reopened its fourth investigation into the closure.

The inquiry is expected to re-open in October.