

State's 'enhanced' tests bite after caterer re-opens

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A Dandenong South commercial caterer is dumping loads of packaged food as part of a rigorous and costly health-department testing regime.

iCook Foods was recently re-opened by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) after being linked to the death of an elderly hospital patient with listeria in February.

After the 35-day shutdown, the department has ordered that specific food lines are laboratory-tested before going to market.

It applies to the company's texture-modified meals for private hospitals, but not its sandwiches.

The ban and subsequent tests have crippled the 35-year-old family business, which insists it has been wrongfully accused.

General manager Benjamin Cook says by the time the test results are back, the food's

shelf-life has expired.

In the first week of tests, 750 meals - about 300 kilos of food - were headed to the dumpster.

"We have to make food to throw out.

"The public sees we're open but the opening is being designed to hamstring us and make us fail.

"No other business in Victoria or Australia has to do this testing."

As a result, the company with 41 staff is set to sue the department and Greater Dandenong Council.

According to iCook Foods, its supply contracts for Meals on Wheels and seven Healthscope private hospitals have since been severed.

A DHHS spokesperson said I Cook Foods needed to show its food was "safe and suitable for consumption by its predominantly vulnerable consumers".

"Effective control of listeria in a food processing environment requires active clean-

ing and sanitising programs, and monitoring through testing programs.

"High risk ingredients used in sandwiches such as smallgoods should be included in the testing program as part of a supplier verification check."

Products with minimal processing such as sandwiches and salads were not expected to be part of a test-and-hold program, the spokesperson said.

An "enhanced testing program", or "clearance program" was a typical response to such incidents, he said.

"It is recognised that a sampling program can be 'scaled down' provided that results demonstrate that systems are under control and that no detection of Listeria or other pathogen at unsafe levels has been identified in the food produced."

iCook Foods director Ian Cook said there was no scientific evidence that the factory was responsible for listeria.



Benjamin Cook dumps hundreds of packaged meals that have expired during a department-ordered testing regime. 192435

Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

"(The DHHS statement) makes us look guilty.

"But they took 37 swabs of our factory, they even swabbed our drain and they couldn't find listeria.

"It was only found in smallgoods that we don't produce."

PS. 22nd APRIL 2019 JOURNAL

Caterer 'horrified' by listeria death

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A Dandenong South commercial caterer says it is "horrified" after being closed down during an investigation into a fatal outbreak of listeriosis.

An elderly woman at the eastern suburbs private hospital died on 4 February. She was diagnosed with listeriosis - an illness normally associated with food contamination.

I Cook Foods of Dandenong South, which provides meals to the private hospital, was closed by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and City of Greater Dandenong on 22 February.

In a statement, i Cook Foods director Ian Cook expressed sympathy for the bereaved family.

"We're a family business operating for more than 30 years.

"We are horrified this has happened and we're doing everything possible to assist the health authorities.

"This has devastated my family, and we, as much as everyone else, wants to get to the bot-



i Cook Foods factory remained closed on 26 February. 190890 Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

tom of how this happened."

In a statement, I Cook Foods stated that it was working closely with its suppliers and health authorities to "determine how listeria may have been introduced to the ingredients we cook at our factory".

"The source of the listeria is yet to be determined, and the health department is still looking at which part of the food handling process was at fault."

It noted that a report to the DHHS found

no contamination on any of the facility's food handling or preparation areas or equipment.

Testing on multiple food product samples collected at I Cook Foods returned six positive samples for listeria.

The company supplies private hospitals, aged care centres and Meals on Wheels services mostly in the eastern suburbs.

According to the DHHS, the facility will not reopen until "further testing and improvements are made".

Listeriosis is an illness usually caused by eating food contaminated by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. The bacteria are widely distributed in the environment and can grow in food at refrigeration temperatures.

Although uncommon, it can be particularly dangerous for pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems.

There have been two cases of listeriosis so far this year, compared to nine for the same period in 2018.

Victoria had 27 cases of listeriosis for the 2018 calendar year.



iCook Foods general manager Benjamin Cook and director Ian Cook in the shut-down factory.

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Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

iCook Foods to sue over shutdown

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has lifted the closure orders imposed on Dandenong South commercial caterer iCook Foods after a food poisoning scare.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Dr Brett Sutton revoked the shutdown order on 28 March - two days after iCook Foods appeared in court claiming it had been unjustly blamed for an elderly hospital patient's death on 4 February.

According to laboratory tests, the sandwiches in question were technically safe, the company argues.

In a statement, Dr Sutton said he was satisfied that required changes had been made to food handling processes to support the production of safe food.

"The department has worked with the company since the closure to identify and rectify concerns which it believed compromised the production of food safe from the risk of contamination.

"Dr Sutton will ask the Greater Dandenong Council to increase its food safety assessments at the premises and implement a food and environmental sampling plan."

iCook Foods director Ian Cook says the company is being forced to operate under impossibly "onerous" conditions - in which its sandwiches had to be lab-tested before they could be delivered and sold.

The three-day testing period would mean that the food's safe shelf-life would expire, he said.

Meanwhile, the month-long shutdown and adverse publicity led to supply contracts for Meals on Wheels and seven Healthscope private hospitals being severed, director Ian Cook said.

In effect, the 35-year-old family business with an "unblemished record" had been ruined.

"(The DHHS) statement did avoid the fact that I had nothing to do with the patient's death.

"They are changing the goal posts after they got it so terribly wrong.

"They were so sure that we killed that woman - they got a terrific bit of media, whipped up a storm about Meals on Wheels and the (laboratory) tests didn't come through."

Dr Sutton said the 21 February closure order was imposed due to the link between the patient's death and iCook Foods' products.

She had been diagnosed with listeriosis, which is normally associated with food contamination, the department stated.

A DHHS spokesperson recently told Star News that "the test result ... is only one of a number of samples which were taken and analysed".

"Genomic sequencing has shown a strong link between food samples from iCook Foods and the elderly woman who died in a private hospital in the eastern suburbs."

Where's the proof?

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A Dandenong South family company says it has been unjustly blamed and shut down by the state's health authorities over the death of an elderly patient.

Catering company iCook Foods, which had run for 35 years with an "unblemished" food-safety record, claims there is no evidence that its food was unsafe.

Meanwhile the business with 41 workers has been effectively destroyed, its devastated director Ian Cook says.

Up to its closure in February, it was the state's largest provider of Meals On Wheels meals as well as providing foods to aged care homes and private hospitals. It turned over more than \$6 million a year.

"How can you sum up destruction?" he says at his now-silent factory.

The health probe was launched after an 86-year-old woman with heart disease died at a private hospital on 4 February.

Seventeen days later, the factory was shut down by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Greater Dandenong Council.

The department has stated the woman had been diagnosed with listeriosis - which is associated with food contamination.

It was "strongly" linked via genomic sequencing to listeria bacterium detected in six products such as ham, silverside and sandwiches at iCook Foods.

However tests also revealed that the sample levels were comfortably within safe food-standards.



iCook Foods director Ian Cook and general manager Benjamin Cook in the empty factory kitchens in Dandenong South. 191789
Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

Australian food standards set the unsafe limit for listeria as more than 100 colony-forming units (CFUs) per gram.

The levels found on the iCook products, including supplied ham and silverside, were less than 10 CFUs per gram.

Samples taken from the kitchen's surfaces and equipment failed to detect any listeria.

A DHHS spokesperson said "the test result

... is only one of a number of samples which were taken and analysed".

"Genomic sequencing has shown a strong link between food samples from iCook Foods and the elderly woman who died in a private hospital in the Eastern suburbs."

iCook Foods general manager Benjamin Cook asks then for the department to show them the evidence.

"What relevance does (the genome) have if below 10 cfu/g is considered safe by Food Standards?"

The business had been regularly audited and inspected by health authorities without incident.

"We know we do a good service with a quality product and quality staff."

In the 17 days between the patient's death and the shutdown, thousands of 'contaminated' meals would have been distributed, iCook Foods argues.

Yet no other cases of listeriosis have been linked to the factory.

Ian Cook says it has since complied with all 37 corrective orders of the department, including a forensic cleardown of the factory.

The department is refusing to allow it to re-open, and is sending in forensic scientists to "build a case" against his business after the fact.

He says the department's actions are unusually heavy-handed.

"You don't close down Coles over a product recall."

The department states it will not lift its shutdown orders until satisfied that "all necessary actions have been taken".

"The Department of Health and Human Services will do everything in its power to safeguard the health of Victoria's most vulnerable."

"The department is continuing to work with iCook Foods to ensure their premises comply with the order under the Food Act - and that all food safety standards are observed and maintained."