

Sutton's slug-gate denial questioned

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

I Cook Foods has raised new doubts over Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton's evidence on a notorious live slug to the parliamentary inquiry into the closure of the Dandenong South business.

Professor Sutton told the inquiry: "I should add that I did not know about any slug at the time that I made the decision for closure, and it obviously formed no part of my determinations around I Cook."

Deputy Chief Health Officer Dr Angie Bone added: "We only heard about the slug from the media reports."

However ICF director Ian Cook says that the department was relying on a report by a City of Greater Dandenong health inspector, which states a live slug was found in the food preparation area.

"It's crystal clear that he received (the inspector's) report - there's no other report written on the 19th of February (2019)."

Professor Sutton told the inquiry he used a "suite of information" - including verbal, oral and emailed information from authorised officers over several days - to make the decision to close I Cook Foods.

A lawyer for the DHHS stated to ICF that the DHHS received "advice" from the council about "poor hygiene practices and lack of process controls at iCook's site" on the same day of the council inspector's report.

On 21 February - the day before closure - an



A picture of the slug as submitted by City of Greater Dandenong to the Parliamentary inquiry into I Cook Foods' closure.

refers to council inspections raising "considerable concerns about cleaning of equipment and food safety standards" but doesn't refer to the slug.

"When we requested (that report/email outlining the basis for the closure) they initially didn't have the documentation," Mr Cook says.

"The email is not what it purports to be."

The DHHS did not respond to questions from Star Journal before deadline.

The Dandenong South-based commercial caterer is in the midst of a \$50 million lawsuit against the DHHS over its forced closure by Professor Sutton over alleged links to a hospital patient's death in early 2019.

ICF has accused the inspector of planting the slug - an accusation denied by the inspector.

All 96 food-safety charges - including four

drawn by City of Greater Dandenong.

Victoria Police has confirmed it's investigating a "complaint made by a Dandenong business alleging unlawful activity by a local council in 2019".

The parliamentary inquiry committee made no determination on "how the slug came to be present in the I Cook Foods kitchen".

It found the CHO's closure order was "prepared and served on valid grounds and for a proper purpose".

Reason Party leader Fiona Patten - who chaired the ICF parliamentary inquiry - said there would be no revisiting of Professor Sutton's evidence.

"The CHO evidence and DHHS evidence was fulsome and not disputed," Ms Patten said.

Opposition health spokesperson and inquiry member Georgie Crozier said it was unlikely the I Cook inquiry would revisit evidence even if there were doubts.

She noted that a criminal investigation of authorities and a civil trial for damages over the closure were afoot.

"This slug-gate is just not going away. It's extraordinary ... what's going on?"

"If there's a miscarriage of justice here, it's a terrible thing. We have a legitimate business here that's had its reputation trashed.

"We have to make sure these systems that are in place, that the evidence is absolutely rock solid, for our community to have faith and trust in our systems."

The State Government was contacted for comment.