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Gastro inquiry head says council ignored the law

"It's not really on, is it? These are matters of safety for the public and compliance with the law and they're being ignored basically." Lyn Stevens QC

The head of the inquiry panel investigating the Havelock North gastro outbreak has expressed disbelief at a council's continual ignoring of drinking water requirements.

Lyn Stevens, QC, raised his concerns during the questioning of Hastings District Council water supply manager Dylan Stuijt on day two of the Government Inquiry into Havelock North Drinking Water yesterday.

It became clear that the council had failed to implement recommendations made by the Hawke's Bay District Health Board drinking water assessors.

In June 2013 the assessors made numerous recommendations to bring the council's water safety plan up to compliance. This included producing a "water supply contamination protocol".

But by October 2014 the recommendations had still not been carried out. Some had not been carried out by the time of last year's outbreak.

Counsel assisting the inquiry, Nathan Gedye, QC, said it appeared "fair to say that Hastings District Council was not allocating much resource" to the plan.

Stevens asked Stuijt if he had read the report and said the council "hasn't done for years the things you've been asked to do".

"It's not really on, is it? These are matters of safety for the public and compliance with the law and they're being ignored basically," Stevens said.

Stuijt said the matters had been raised with staff but not acted upon. He could not explain why he had not escalated the matter.

He said he was disappointed himself, and attributed some of the issue to the drinking water assessors' communications being paper-based.

The council used electronic communications so it had not paid sufficient attention to the assessors' correspondence.

"This particular report sat in my in-tray, I must confess," Stuijt said.

The inquiry began on Monday and is expected to run for two to three weeks. The three-strong panel consists of Stevens, Karen Poutasi and Anthony Wilson.

It is looking into the widespread outbreak of gastroenteritis in Havelock North in August 2016, with more than 5000 people falling ill, following the confirmation of the presence of E coli in the water supply.

On Monday the inquiry heard that the infection likely came from sheep faeces that entered the Mangaterere Stream and that the town bores, which are near the stream, had drawn the contaminated water into the water supply through permeable layers in the ground.

The inquiry will report back by March 31 with findings on how the Havelock North water supply system became contaminated, how this was subsequently addressed, how local and central government agencies responded to the public health outbreak that occurred as a result of the contamination, and how to reduce the risk of outbreaks of this nature recurring.



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