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Hotel inquiry recall, heat on Sutton rises

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**Richard Baker
Noel Towell**

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton actively authorised an email on the day in March that the state's hotel quarantine was set up, telling the federal government that private security guards were going to be used to guard returning travellers.

The emails obtained by *The Age* contradict Professor Sutton's written and verbal testimony to the hotel quarantine inquiry, in which he said he had not been aware of the use of private security until late May, after the devastating COVID-19 outbreak had occurred.

The series of emails was not tendered to the Board of Inquiry by the Department of Health and Human Services, even though they were required to provide all relevant materials. The inquiry announced yesterday it would hold an extraordinary sitting on October 20, though it's not known what the sitting is for or who will be asked to appear.

Several departmental sources have this week claimed to *The Age* that a deliberate decision was made by DHHS and its legal advisers not to give certain emails to the inquiry.

"There was much debate but a decision was made that the department could get away with claiming they weren't relevant," said one source, who cannot be identified. Under Victoria's Inquiries Act, it is an offence to hinder, obstruct or mislead an inquiry.

The timing is important because, as the most visible health official in the Andrews government, Professor Sutton might have been able to use

his authority to raise questions about the use of private security guards, as he later did, on the basis that a casual and ill-trained workforce was not equipped to work in the hazardous environment of hotel quarantine.

A spokesman for the Health Department said in response to questions that a thorough and rapid search for documents had been conducted when the inquiry was set up. In mid-July, the inquiry had clarified that only documents deemed the "most relevant" and of "greatest assistance" should be provided, amounting to about 600 documents.

Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton

The department had now provided 4000 documents and this week was asked for a further two by the inquiry, the spokesman said.

The missing email chain shows Professor Sutton directing another Health Department official to answer questions posed by the Federal Department of Home Affairs about Victoria's hotel quarantine arrangements, and then acknowledging the response from his department.

Government sources have confirmed that the Department of Health and Human Services provided the inquiry with further

emails yesterday after receiving a notice to produce. The notice came after *The Age* had alerted the inquiry to the existence of fresh emails.

Just hours after the National Cabinet decided on March 27 to place all international arrivals into 14 days' mandatory hotel quarantine, Professor Sutton received an email from Sandra Jeffrey, the assistant secretary in Home Affairs for border measures. Ms Jeffrey asked Professor Sutton to provide an overview of Victoria's hotel quarantine arrangements and key contacts. Professor Sutton asked departmental colleagues to prepare a response and to copy him into the email sent back to Ms Jeffrey.

In answer to question four from Ms Jeffrey about security arrangements, the DHHS response stated: "Directions will be provided to passengers as the (sic) disembark and will be supported by Victoria Police at the airport. Private security is being contracted to provide security at the hotels with escalation arrangements to VicPol as needed." Professor Sutton was copied on this email.

The email chain shows Professor Sutton thanking a colleague for his work after Home Affairs was advised of Victoria's arrangements, including the use of private security.

Meanwhile, Premier Daniel Andrews yesterday announced Jeremi Moule as the new Department of Premier and Cabinet secretary. Mr Moule has been its deputy secretary for governance policy and coordination since 2018. He replaces Chris Eccles who resigned on Monday after contradictions emerged in his testimony to the inquiry.