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NO ALERT
Public wasn't warned of bug threat
By KARA PHILLIPS

CONROY Smallgoods was told last Friday to start withholding its ready-to-eat meats, but the public was only told yesterday of a possible link to the deadly **listeria** outbreak.

Conroy managing director Pat Conroy revealed last night that his company "had discussions (with the Health Department) late Friday to withhold products".

The State Government only issued the product recall at 4pm yesterday after tests confirmed that the deadly **listeria** bacteria was found on equipment at the Adelaide firm's factory.

Health Minister John Hill said because there had been no conclusive results on Friday to link the outbreak to Conroy's, the department could not legally enforce a recall earlier.

There had not been enough **listeria** detected in meat then to justify shutting down a firm with 200 employees and test results on machinery could not be obtained until this week.

Listeria also had been detected at the firm's Bowden factory 18 months ago. Ham steak was recalled, but authorities later cleared the factory.

The South Australian family-owned business last night was recalling products from retail and wholesale outlets.

Consumers who have already bought Conroy's products need to return them to the place of purchase.

Continued Page 6

Cover-up: Public wasn't alerted to bug threat

From Page 1

Supermarkets yesterday started removing the products from sale.

Tests confirmed **listeria** contributed to the deaths of two people in Adelaide hospitals since October. Conroy's ready-to-eat meats are supplied to most hospitals across Adelaide, including the Royal Adelaide Hospital, where one of the victims died and another person is recovering from **listeria** poisoning.

Mr Conroy said the company's first concern was the welfare and safety of customers and consumers. "This is for us a most serious matter and our first priority is to recall our product," Mr Conroy told The Advertiser. "There was one positive test about 18 months ago and that was immediately rectified to the satisfaction of authorities. **Listeria** is a constant and recurring problem for food manufacturers and is something about which Conroy's is most vigilant."

Conroy's products are sold in SA and interstate.

Mr Hill yesterday made the order to recall a number of meat products as a matter of "public health and safety".

"What we do know is that Conroy's has equipment that is contaminated - that's a breach of the Food Act," Mr Hill said.

However, he said while Conroy's cold corned beef was supplied to the RAH and probably eaten by the two patients, there was still no definitive link to prove the meat was infected and was the same **listeria** strain found in the patients and the RAH kitchen.

"We will be able to say definitively whether there is a link later on, but it may take another week or more when further tests are completed," Mr Hill said.

He conceded that "if you look at the circumstantial evidence, there is a potential link".

The recall was served on the business yesterday at 4pm. Conroy's faces fines of up to \$250,000 if it fails to comply. Further production at the factory is suspended while intensive cleaning is carried out. Goods which have been recalled include champagne ham, mettwurst, pastrami, fritz and sandwich ham. Most products requiring cooking are not included.

"Action has been taken in relation to the RAH to ensure that the sanitation process is appropriate," Mr Hill said.

Four cases of **listeria** infection have been reported in the state's hospitals since the end of October, with two patients dying and two now recovering.

Food testing began in mid-November. Each year, about two cases of **listeria** are reported to the

department, with the last outbreak occurring in 1996.

It is the biggest recall of meat since January, 1995, when an outbreak of the E.Coli infection from the consumption of Garibaldi smallgoods killed one child and led to more than 20 requiring hospital treatment, many requiring weeks of dialysis.

In 1998, there was an outbreak of salmonella poisoning in Alba Gelati, and Nippy's had a range of its products recalled in March, 1999, because of salmonella poisoning. Nippy's was later absolved of responsibility when the outbreak was traced to growers.

Opposition health spokesman Robert Brokenshire yesterday said the Government's handling of the outbreak was ``totally unsatisfactory''.

``They've allowed human safety to be put at risk because they've been completely tardy in notifying the community," he said.

PAGE 17: Vote line

PRODUCTS BEING RECALLED

- * Luncheon sliced
- * SL Special Virginian
- * Bung Cryovac (Fritz)
- * Champagne ham
- * Ham on bone half
- * Kabanosse VP
- * Luncheon loaf
- * Mettwurst
- * Pastrami
- * Sandwich ham

Illus: Logo (color): conroy's

Photo (color): conroy's meat products

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