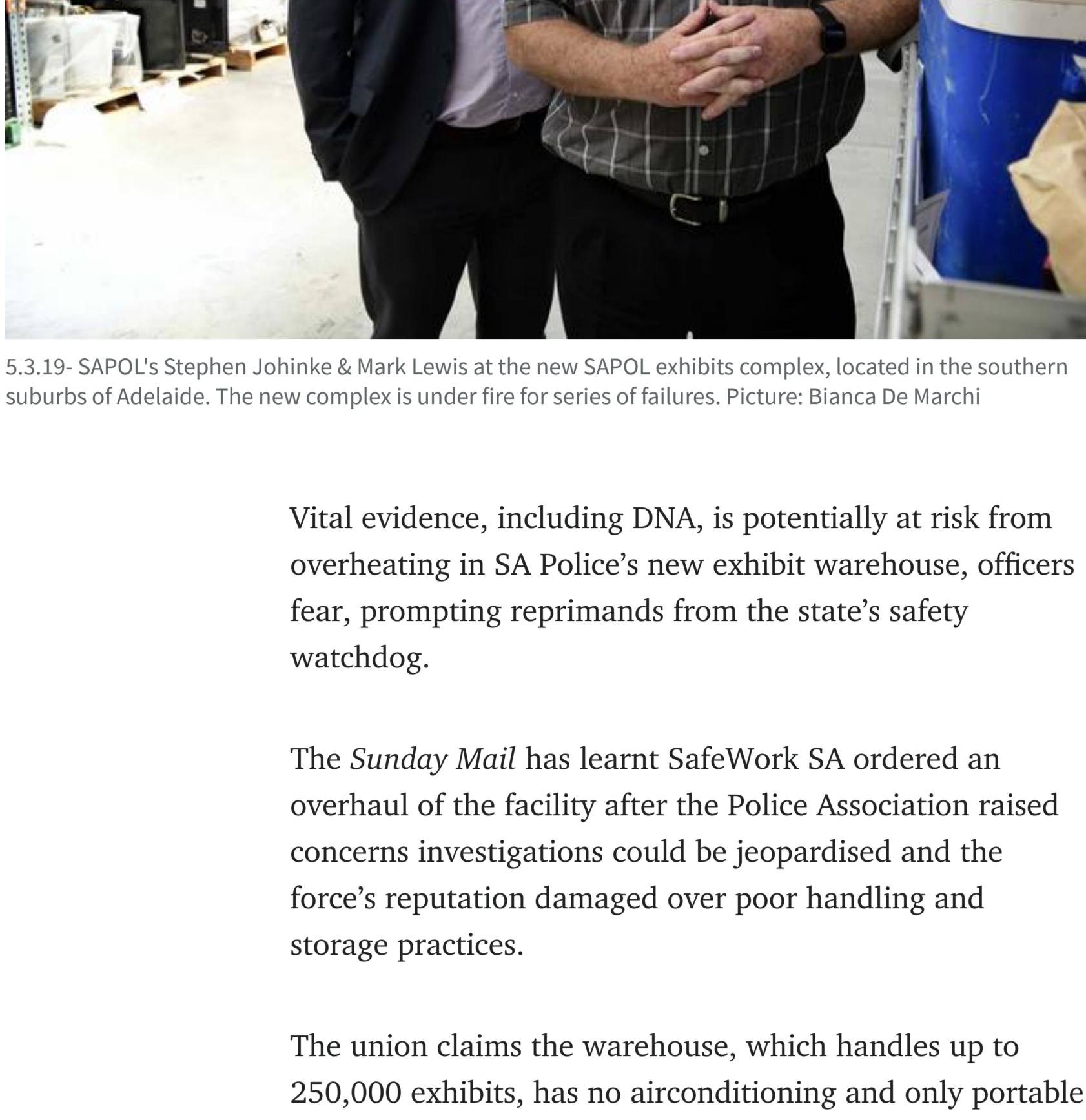


News > South Australia

SafeWork SA orders overhaul of SA Police exhibit warehouse over concerns for poor handling and storage practices

Vital evidence, including DNA, is potentially at risk from overheating in SA Police's new exhibit warehouse, officers fear, prompting reprimands from the state's safety watchdog.

Andrew Hough
 @andrew_hough March 9, 2019 - 10:15AM Sunday Mail (SA) 11 comments



5.3.19- SAPOL's Stephen Johnkin and Mark Lewis at the new SAPOL exhibits complex, located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide. The new complex is under fire for series of failures. Picture: Bianca De Marchi

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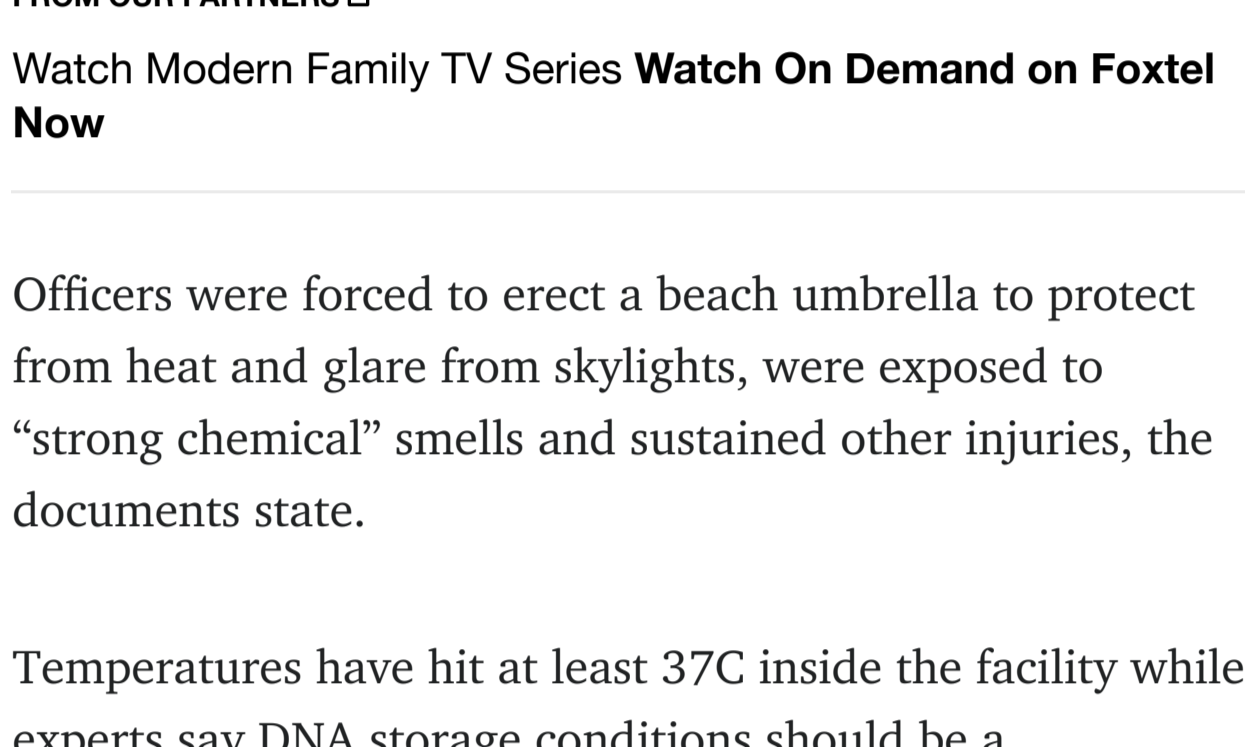
The *Sunday Mail* has learnt SafeWork SA ordered an overhaul of the facility after the Police Association raised concerns investigations could be jeopardised and the force's reputation damaged over poor handling and storage practices.

The union claims the warehouse, which handles up to 250,000 exhibits, has no airconditioning and only portable fans.

Experts have also warned senior officers that environmental factors "hindering" DNA preservation at the new evidence facility could affect cold case murder and sex crime inquiries.

While police acknowledge "teething problems" at the 13,600sqm high security site, management say they have no information nor evidence any DNA evidence has been damaged or inquiries hampered.

They say the "state of the art" storage warehouse is a vast improvement in "all types" of evidence storage, having replaced Adelaide, Sturt and Christies Beach police stations' facilities.



Cars at the new SAPOL exhibits complex. Picture: Bianca De Marchi

At least \$100,000 taxpayers' money, senior police add, will also be saved a year by less travelling to the more central location, which cannot be identified for security reasons.

The Police Association has privately written to Commissioner Grant Stevens, outlining officers' concerns at the facility, the cost of which remains a secret.

Leaked documents show that since September 26, at least 10 hazard and incident reports have included officer injuries and struggling in extreme heat.

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Officers were forced to erect a beach umbrella to protect from heat and glare from skylights, were exposed to "strong chemical" smells and sustained other injuries, the documents state.

Temperatures have hit at least 37C inside the facility while experts say DNA storage conditions should be a "consistent" 25C, correspondence shows.

State Government safety inspectors made a surprise visit in mid-December last year, after which two "improvement notices" were issued for health and safety law breaches — working in "excessive temperatures" and risks using metal cages.



Storage racks and cages containing exhibits at the new SAPOL complex. Picture: Bianca De Marchi

Police had a February 8 deadline to fix the problems outlined in the notices, a legally enforced order forcing organisations to address safety concerns, but an early April extension has been granted.

The centre, built on a former industrial site to handle more than 250,000 exhibits and 250 impounded cars, was publicly closed during January's record heatwave, forcing staff onto restricted duties in airconditioned areas.

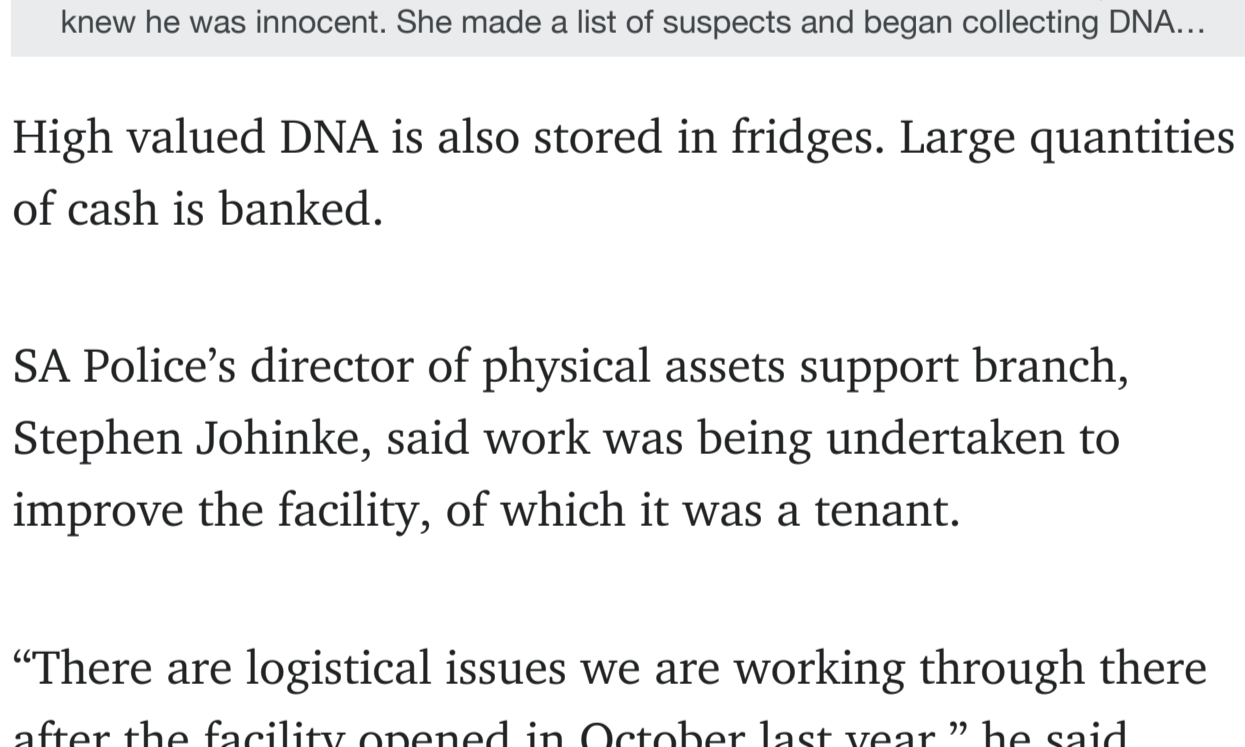
The union claims the main warehouse has no airconditioning and only portable fans.

Safework SA inspectors had a "reasonable belief that workers ... maybe exposed to a risk to their health and safety due to excessive temperatures which are not adequately controlled within the warehouse area", according to one notice.

A police risk assessment will review control measures for "working in excessive heat", it said.

The second notice revealed a "reasonable belief that workers may be exposed to a risk to their health and safety whilst loading/unloading from, or accessing the metal storage cages".

In a separate memo, an independent DNA expert raised concerns about poor storage, use of plastic wrapping and sample handling of evidence crucial to Major Crime and Special Crimes Investigation detectives.



Refrigerators and freezers for storing DNA and blood at the complex. Picture: Bianca De Marchi

She claimed there was currently no "DNA preservation guidelines". Senior police said there was a "transition" to the main facility but evidence management met internal standards.

In his letter, Police Association president Mark Carroll warned of evidence "degradation" and accused senior officers of wasting at least \$378,000 on products "not fit for purpose" or unsuitable.

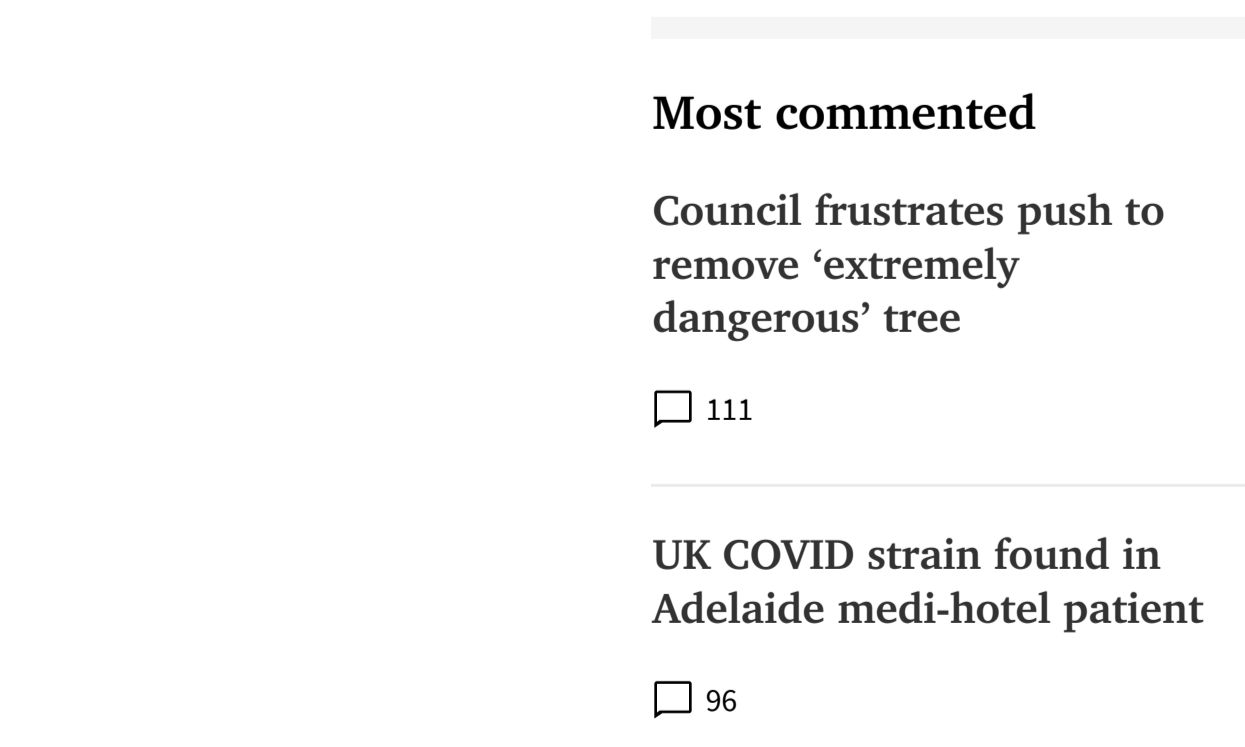
"The association is concerned that the reputation of (SA Police) may be fundamentally impaired as a result of inadequate exhibit storage considering for exhibits, in particular DNA and electronic recording material," he wrote on February 20.

"The continual wasted expenditure on equipment that is unsuitable to an exhibit property facility poses a risk to members' health and safety and requires immediate action."

After official police comment was sought last week, Mr Stevens authorised an exclusive facility tour that included, purpose built temperature and humidity controlled rooms, a dedicated drug storage rooms and gun bunker.

Crime scene evidence, seized equipment, proceeds of crimes such as cash, jewels and other valuables as well as guns and drugs can be stored for up to 20 years before destroyed or returned.

Photography was banned in certain parts — a bank vault-style gun bunker surrounded by 23cm of reinforced concrete and illegal drug storage.



High valued DNA is also stored in fridges. Large quantities of cash is banked.

SA Police's director of physical assets support branch, Stephen Johnkin, said work it was being undertaken to improve the facility, of which it was a tenant.

"There are logistical issues we are working through there after the facility opened in October last year," he said.

"Having the hottest summer on record has also been challenging. It is a state of the art facility and it is an evolving beast."

In a statement, Mr Carroll said it was an "internal matter" between the union and police.

"(SA Police) is fully aware of our concerns and is currently dealing with them," he said.

"Some of those concerns relate to the storage of evidence. We are comfortable those concerns are being addressed."

A SafeWork SA spokeswoman said it was "working with (police) to address the issues identified".

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