

Lawyer for cult leader Serge Benhayon ‘bullied blogger’



Health blogger Esther Rockett. Picture: AAP

By STEPHEN RICE

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A lawyer acting for Australian cult leader Serge Benhayon, who claims to be the reincarnation of Leonardo da Vinci, has been fined and reprimanded after deliberately sending “insulting and demeaning” legal letters to a blogger as her father lay dying and on the day of his funeral.

Solicitor Paula Marie Fletcher sent the letters to anti-cult activist Esther Rockett, who was being sued for defamation by self-styled “spiritual healer” Serge Benhayon, leader of the northern NSW-based religious group Universal Medicine.

Mr Benhayon spectacularly lost the case four years ago when a jury found Ms Rockett’s statements that the one-time Sydney tennis coach was “the leader of a socially harmful cult” and “a charlatan who makes fraudulent medical claims” were true.

Mr Benhayon, who calls himself an Ascended Master, is believed to have more than 2000 followers in Australia and Britain and teaches treatments he claims to have invented such as “chakra-puncture” and “esoteric breast massage”.

Judge Julia Lonergan, who presided over the defamation case, referred Ms Fletcher to the NSW Legal Services Commissioner to consider whether her conduct amounted to unsatisfactory professional conduct or professional misconduct.



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Justice Lonergan said the letters sent to Ms Rockett, who had waged a battle to expose Universal Medicine after initially seeing Mr Benhayon for a healing session, were “at best unprofessional and at most discourteous”.

“They are at worst, bullying and harassment, deliberately deployed at a time when the defendant is likely to be distracted, sad and vulnerable, with the aim of demoralising her about the litigation she was defending,” the judge said.

“There is no place for any such personal remarks and insults in any professional correspondence in legal proceedings.”

Mullumbimby-based Ms Fletcher has a long association with Universal Medicine. Her daughter Emmalee was married to Mr Benhayon’s eldest son, Michael.

Ms Fletcher claimed that Universal Law was “completely independent” of Universal Medicine but acknowledged that two other lawyers involved in drafting the letters had “significant involvement” in Universal Medicine and were friends of Mr Benhayon.

Solicitor Paula Marie Fletcher.

At the time her father died in 2017, Ms Rockett was defending two defamation cases, one in NSW brought by Mr Benhayon, another in Queensland brought by two of his supporters.

Ms Rockett had notified Universal Law that her father was seriously ill and asked that her father's condition be kept confidential. When her father died a few days later, Ms Rockett asked Universal Law if correspondence could be avoided on the day of his funeral "out of respect for my family". Instead, Ms Fletcher emailed her a 31-page letter.

"There was no order or compulsion requiring the letter be sent that day," Justice Lonergan said. "The choice of date seems to have been deliberate.

"Most concerningly, the letter contains a number of personal insults, directed to the defendant, about her character, professionalism, motivation and probity."

The contents of the letter were so vile the judge made them subject to a non-publication order.

In an affidavit, Ms Fletcher admitted the letters were inappropriate and used language that was "unprofessional, peremptory and discourteous", but the judge noted that "nowhere in the affidavit is there an apology directed to Ms Rockett".

Although Ms Rockett's defences to the Benhayon claim succeeded, the two defamation proceedings bankrupted her and left her homeless.

In a disciplinary hearing in December, Ms Fletcher was found by the NSW Legal Services Commissioner to have engaged in unsatisfactory professional conduct; she was reprimanded and fined \$1500.

In a statement, Ms Fletcher acknowledged her letters were "discourteous" and said she had apologised for them.

"All other allegations made against me in a complaint which were put forward by one individual were found to be unsubstantiated," she said.

Ms Fletcher said she had not had any contact with Mr Benhayon or Universal Medicine for "several years".

