



The verdict of the HPCSA inquiry into the professional conduct of Professor Noakes

5 May 2017

The hearing into the conduct of Prof Tim Noakes concluded on Friday 21 April 2017, and Prof Tim Noakes has been found not guilty of unprofessional conduct by the Professional Conduct Committee of the Medical and Dental Board of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). The HPCSA has made the edited version of the judgment transcript available, and, for the benefit of our members, the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA) and The Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA) would like to highlight some key points from our understanding of the judgment.

The Professional Conduct Committee ruled that Prof Noakes gave advice as an author and scientist, and not as a medical practitioner. The Committee found that Prof Noakes had not contravened any ethical rule or regulation, and hence had not acted unprofessionally.

We would like to comment on the following points that have been raised in the media following the conclusion of the hearing, by referring to the transcript of the judgment (see link below).

1. It has been stated that the outcome of the hearing has given the seal of approval to the low-carbohydrate high-fat (LCHF) diet.

It is our understanding that this is a misinterpretation of the verdict. The chairperson of the HPCSA Professional Conduct Committee, Adv Joan Adams, noted the following in her verdict: "While the Committee is aware of evidence that there is a strong link between diet and a fast growing global challenge on obesity and illness, this Committee cannot pronounce upon the LCHF diet as such or the relationship between infant and adult nutrition."

2. There have been calls on dietitians and nutritionists to revise the advice they give to clients, especially for diabetics and those with insulin resistance, as well as to review policy.

It is unclear exactly which policies are expected to be revised. The verdict does not make any judgment on the LCHF diet for adults with diabetes or insulin resistance. Dietitians and nutritionists are guided by national and international practice guidelines from the Society for Endocrinology, Metabolism and Diabetes in South Africa (SEMDSA), the International Diabetes Federation (IDF), and the American Diabetes Association (ADA). Dietitians are trained to evaluate new and emerging evidence, to interpret if advice needs to be revised accordingly. Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which is compulsory to maintain registration with the HPCSA, helps dietitians keep up to date with emerging evidence.

3. It has been commented that the complainant (the HPCSA) was not able to provide evidence to show the benefits of a conventional low-fat diet over an LCHF diet.

There was no expectation of the complainant to prove that certain diets were better than others. The hearing was to ascertain whether Prof Noakes acted unprofessionally. Also, almost all the evidence presented by Prof Noakes was on adults and not on infants, or even children.

4. There have been calls for dietary guidelines to be changed based on the outcome of the hearing.

The ruling notes, however, that, "it deserves mention that this Committee's purpose and mandate is not to set nutritional or dietary standards for the world. So that counts for all babies." A scientific and rigorous process is used to develop international and local dietary guidelines that are regularly revised.

An urgent and in-depth analysis of the verdict is required by all health professionals and organisations working on health issues to understand its implications for the fraternity. For those who wish to review the minority and majority judgment, the document can be accessed [here](#).

ADSA and NSSA Executive Committees