

‘My advice was evidence based’ – Noakes

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) this February closed its case against University of Cape Town emeritus professor Tim Noakes on a charge of unprofessional conduct and will resume with cross-examination of the controversial A-rated scientist on 17 October.

Noakes was allegedly unprofessional in giving unconventional, non-evidence-based advice to a breastfeeding mother on a social network. The charge followed two tweets Noakes made to breastfeeding mother Pippa Leenstra on 4 February 2014, saying that good first foods for infant weaning are low carbohydrate, high fat. Johannesburg dietitian Claire Julsing Strydom, then president of the Association for Dietetics in South Africa, responded to Leenstra on Twitter, lodging a complaint with the HPCSA on 5 February. The HPCSA formally charged Noakes in September 2014.

The HPCSA’s last expert witness at the February hearing was Stellenbosch University psychiatry professor Willie Pienaar, a part-time bioethics lecturer. At the earlier (November 2015) session, the HPCSA called Julsing Strydom as a factual witness and heard testimony by retired North-West University nutrition professor Este Vorster, North-West University nutrition professor Salome Kruger, Medical Research Council unit head and paediatrics professor Muhammed Ali Dhansay, and HPCSA legal officer Nkagiseng Madube. Vorster, Kruger, Dhansay and Pienaar suggested that Noakes was in a doctor/patient relationship with Leenstra and that the advice he gave was unconventional because it was not evidence based. Madube contended that the HPCSA had followed due process in charging him, which Noakes’ legal team strongly contested.

Noakes himself began testifying to the HPCSA Professional Conduct Committee,

chaired by Pretoria advocate Joan Adams, on 10 February. He denied that he was in a doctor-patient relationship with Leenstra, saying he had not practised medicine for more than 10 years. As a scientist, his main concern was to give people evidence-based information from which they could make up their own minds. His testimony lasted nearly 40 hours and was supplemented by 4 000 pages and 900 slides with study references to suggest that his advice was evidence based. Noakes stressed that his advice was only ‘unconventional’ to anyone who failed to study the evidence. The case is being heard in Newlands, Cape Town.

Marika Sboros

*BizNews.com, Johannesburg and London
sborosm@gmail.com*

S Afr Med J 2016;106(4):322.

DOI:10.7196/SAMJ.2016.v106i4.10764