



The Editor
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Noakes' diet and health implications

The apparent endorsement by Members of Parliament of South Africa of the latest fashionable diet, 'Banting' ('SA's Ticking Time-bomb', Cape Times, 19 August 2014), and the message it sends out to the public about healthy eating, is cause for deep concern - not only regarding Parliament's support for it as an evidenced-based 'diet revolution', but sadly, the long-term impact this may have on the health of the very people they have been elected to serve.

Any diet for weight loss and maintenance should be safe and promote health in the long-term. Currently the long term safety and health benefits of low carbohydrate, high fat diets – such as Atkins, Paleo and South Beach, and in which Banting falls - are unproven, and in particular whether it is safe in pregnancy and childhood.

Importantly, while the consumption of a low carbohydrate, high fat diet may lead to initial weight loss and associated health benefits - as indeed would a balanced weight loss diet - there is good reason for concern that this diet may rather result in nutritional deficiencies, increased risk for heart disease, diabetes mellitus, kidney problems, constipation, certain cancers and excessive iron stores in some individuals in the long term. Research leaves no doubt that healthy balanced eating is very important in reducing disease risk (see web page below dedicated to this debate).

It is therefore a serious concern that Professor Timothy Noakes, a colleague respected for his research in Sports Science, is aggressively promoting this diet as a 'revolution', making outrageous unproven claims about disease prevention, and maligning the integrity and credibility of peers who criticise his diet for being evidence-deficient and not conforming to the tenets of good and responsible science. This goes against the University of Cape Town's commitment to academic freedom as the prerequisite to fostering responsible and respectful intellectual debate and free enquiry.

This is not the forum to debate details of diets, but to draw attention to the need for us to be pragmatic. Research in this field has proven time and again that the quest for lean and healthy bodies cannot be a quick-fix , 'one- size-fits-all' solution. The major challenge lies in establishing sustainable and healthy dietary and physical activity patterns to promote long term weight maintenance and health after weight loss, and includes addressing psychosocial, environmental and physiological factors.

Our bodies need a range of nutrients sourced from a variety of food groups to survive. Diets like the Banting are, however, typically 'one dimensional' in focus. They promote increased intake of protein and fat containing foods at the expense of healthy carbohydrate containing foods, and focus on adherence to a limited food plan. Ignored are the other important factors impacting on health - like physical activity (the importance of which we cannot emphasise enough), environmental factors, and individual health profiles.

UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences, a leading research institution in Africa, has a reputation for research excellence to uphold. Above all, our research must be socially responsible. We have therefore taken the unusual step of distancing ourselves from the proponents of this diet. To foster informed engagement of the issues related to the Diet debate, the Faculty has established a web page with material on this: <http://www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/news/high-fat-diet-debate>.

Sincerely

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Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi

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ENDS

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