



## NSSA newsbits

The Cape Branch of NSSA hosted a mini-symposium on fatty acids on 31 July to address the current controversial issue of fat in the diet. The expert panel of speakers included Dr Celeste Naude, Stellenbosch University; Prof David Marais, University of Cape Town and Groote Schuur Hospital; Dr Petro Wolmarans, Medical Research Council; and Dr Dawie van Velden, Stellenbosch University. The event was attended by 120 people.

Dr Naude opened up the symposium with a scientific examination of the current evidence relating to macronutrient concentrations in the diet. This sparked discussion among the delegates that specifically addressed issues surrounding a low-carbohydrate diet versus a balanced diet. Dr Naude reiterated the danger of discarding evidence or reporting selected results from scientific trials or reviews. The presentation also highlighted the danger of concentrating on a single nutrient which limits the variety of food consumed, and which could lead to other complications. The emphasis should be on assisting the population to practically maintain weight loss over time, and provide education around the quantity and quality of the macronutrients consumed. This message was reinforced by the presentation given by Dr Wolmarans, who stated that the focus should be on foods, rather than single nutrients. She also suggested that the type of fat in the diet is more important than the total fat consumed, and discussed the different types of fats and oils, as well as those consumed by the

general population. Delegates asked many questions around fats and oils that have been wrongly designated as toxic or unhealthy.

Prof Marais delivered a very stimulating presentation on conditions requiring a low-fat diet. He used case studies from practice to stress the effect of diet and medication on a patient's lipid profile. Following a low-fat diet had a considerable effect on patients with rare genetic or familial disorders, for example, adrenoleukodystrophy. This thought-provoking and informative session provided new insights into the dietary management of certain rare medical disorders. The day ended with a lively and interactive presentation from Dr van Velden who reported on the responsibility of the media in improving public understanding of science. The sensationalisation of claims by scientists and the media can be misleading and irresponsible, so that false hopes are raised, while "scare stories" can create unnecessary fear. Once these situations have been created, they can be very difficult to correct because the public is gullible and easily misled by overoptimistic media reports of cures for cancer, other diseases and sensational weight-loss diets. The public must be made aware that science is always incomplete and incremental, and that knowledge is imperfect and based on the best available evidence. Scientific reporting should strive for honesty by distributing unbiased knowledge and preserving scientific and intellectual integrity.