

**PLANET HOODIA:** Consumer activist raises new alert about 'scam'

# Diet drug dodges ASA again

**ANNA-MARIA LOMBARD**

A BRITISH couple who built their South African empire on discredited hoodia diet products have dodged advertising bosses yet again by launching a new "diet gel" that makes the same claims as their other products, sparking a fraud complaint.

Chris and Jasmine Grindlay's company, Planet Hoodia, was first hauled before the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in 2008 when medicine consumer activist Dr Harris Steinman complained about the therapeutic claims made about its Hoodia Slender Gel.

The ASA subsequently ruled against Planet Hoodia's advertising and product claims 13 times and even instructed it to drop the word "hoodia".

ASA communications manager Corné Koch said they have no evidence that Planet Hoodia complied with their rulings.

"February's Ad Alert still stands — no ASA member may place Planet Hoodia advertisements before the ASA has notified them to proceed," said Koch.

Steinman has now lodged a new complaint against Planet Hoodia's latest offering, "Slimbetti".

"There is still not a shred of evidence that hoodia can be absorbed through the skin and result in appetite suppression or weight loss," said Steinman.

"Until this is proven with robust evidence this should be regarded as nothing but a scam," he added.

Steinman has now also laid a complaint of fraud with the National Directorate of Public Prosecutions, which wrote back saying the matter was receiving attention.

Chris Grindlay confirmed this week that there is no science backing their products, but says they are "herbal and of the best quality".

Grindlay says they have complied with the ASA rulings over the years by "recalling stock ... destroying the old packaging and replacing it with brand-new design boxes".

"We have taken out all of the claims ... regarding our Hoodia-based products," says Grindlay.

"Our latest Hoodia products have no claims on them," Grindlay added.

But while old Slender Max — which costs about R350 for gel — and new Slimbetti (about R33) boxes show only the name of the product, the company's old and new websites still sport the same Hoodia gel testimonials and claims.

One new Slimbetti magazine advert is worded carefully to dodge the most flagrant flaunting of ASA rulings, but still claims the product is effective and safe.

Health Department spokesperson Fidel Habebe said the Medicines Control Council will publish its long-awaited regulations for complementary and alternative medicines, including weight-loss products, at the

## Hood(ia)winked

### December 2008

Medicine activist Dr Harris Steinman launches first ASA complaint against Hoodia Slender Gel for claiming that the product suppresses appetite, reduces cravings, increases energy levels, enhances skin tone, will assist with reducing appearance of cellulite and increasing body detoxification.



### February 2009

ASA accepts Planet Hoodia's voluntary undertaking to change efficacy claims on Hoodia Slender Gel advertisement on its website and promotional pamphlets. Planet Hoodia voluntarily changes their name from Hoodia Slender Gel to Slender Gel.



## Spot the difference?

WHILE Planet Hoodia has repeatedly changed the names of its products to dodge the ASA, it seem to have neglected to refresh some of the "thousands" of consumer testimonies it relies on.

On the old Slender Max website ([www.slendermax.co.za/testimonials](http://www.slendermax.co.za/testimonials)) that the ASA ruled against, a man called Robin, complete with before-and-after pictures, states, "I started using Hoodia Gel and THERMOSLIM in AUGUST 2009 and I lost 8kg in 7 weeks."

"I found the product easy to use and followed the instructions carefully. I didn't have to change much and ate sensibly."

"The product has helped me tremendously and I am grateful to Slender Max for the NEW ME. I have a new take on life and Live it to the Fullest. With Gratitude, Robin."

The new Slimbetti website (<http://slimbetti.com/products/hoodia-gel/>) claims, "When I started using the products I lost 8kg in 7 weeks."

"I found the product easy to use and followed the instructions carefully. I didn't have to change much and ate sensibly."

"The products has [sic] helped me tremendously and I am grateful for the NEW ME. I have a new take on life and Live it to the Fullest. Robin, Athlone, CT."



### November 2009

ASA rules Planet Hoodia must pre-clear their advertisement for pre-publication advice — once-off pre-clearance sanction.

### September 2009

Planet Hoodia again found to be in breach of the ASA's ruling and undertakes to remove the references to "Hoodia" from its advertising.

### June 2009

ASA rules that Planet Hoodia is in breach of its undertaking. No sanctions imposed.

### February 2010

ASA rules against Slender Gel, Planet Hoodia instructed to withdraw advertising.



### March 2010

ASA rules against Slender Max, Planet Hoodia instructed to withdraw advertising. ASA rules against Slender Caps, Planet Hoodia instructed to withdraw its advertising.

### May 2010

ASA finds Planet Hoodia in breach of Slender Gel ruling, no sanctions imposed.

### June 2010

Steinman lodges yet another complaint that Planet Hoodia remains in breach and Planet Hoodia is sanctioned to pre-clear all its advertising for a period of six months.

### Dec & Jan 2010

Steinman lodges new breach allegations against Hoodia Slender Gel, saying that Planet Hoodia continued to use the same offending advertising in People & Finesse magazines. Steinman also asks ASA to rule against Clicks and Dis-chem for ongoing store marketing and support of unsubstantiated products.

### October 2010

ASA rules that Planet Hoodia's website and print advertisement in Vrouekeur magazine breached previous rulings. Planet Hoodia instructed to publish the ruling in Vrouekeur by January 2011.



**PLANET HOODIA FAILS TO PROVE WEIGHT LOSS CLAIMS**  
ASA ISSUES SANCTIONS

### February 2011

ASA rules that Planet Hoodia remains in breach & issues a harsher sanction, preparing full-page, full colour statement that Planet Hoodia must place and pay for in various magazines. ASA issues "Ad Alert" to its members, asking them not to accept any Planet Hoodia advertising until such time as the ASA sees that the required statement has appeared in all the magazines.

**Steinman lodges complaint against Planet Hoodia's new product Slimbetti. Dis-chem continues to sell Hoodia Gel under Slender Max label, which continues to make weight-loss claims.**

27 June 2011

Grafika: ANNA-MARIA LOMBARD, ELSOLET JOUBERT

end of June, with guidelines published for comment in July.

In the absence of regulation products like the Grindlays' have not had to prove that they are safe or effective and have turned complementary medicines into an industry turning over more than R4 billion per year.

Steinman this month asked the ASA to reprimand Dis-chem for selling unsubstantiated products or else withdraw its slogan, "Pharmacists Who Care".

The ASA has declined, instead approaching the Self-Medication Manufacturing Association of South Africa (Smasa), a self-regulating body of which Dis-chem is a member and that subscribes to the ASA code and rulings. Smasa executive director Allison Vienings says they are still considering their advice to Dis-chem.

Dis-chem's group category manager of vitamins and supplements, Craig Fairweather, said they asked Planet Hoodia to change the offending pack-

aging and "will abide by any further MCC ruling".

Another website that introduces Jasmine Grindlay as life coach, describes how the Grindlays first visited SA in 2001 and "fell in love" with the country so much that they immigrated here and "founded two branches of their UK operations" in 2002.

The Grindlays settled in a R4,5 million home in the posh Cape Town seaside suburb of Llandudno and have sold their products online and

through major retail pharmacies.

Chris Grindlay says they founded Planet Hoodia after watching a BBC television programme on how the Khoisan had used hoodia to suppress their appetite for thousands of years. He claims they were one of the first companies to export hoodia to the U.S. and boasts "thousands of happy customers who've lost up to 50kg each with our Hoodia gel".

Steinman points out that the BBC programme popularised a myth and that the San used hoodia in raw form for other medicinal reasons and that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has been acting against companies marketing hoodia.

He says anecdotal evidence is no proof of efficacy and calls for controlled trials before being allowed to raise consumers' hopes.

In 2008 Unilever abandoned its R197 million hoodia study, aimed at bringing it to market, because it could not prove it effective or safe.

But even if it was, "can Grindlay explain why number P57, the active component of hoodia, has been found in his product?" asks Steinman.

Grindlay declined to respond to detailed questions on Slender Gel and Slimbetti.

— [investigations@modia24.com](mailto:investigations@modia24.com)