

'Discovery tried to extort R1 million'

Pharmacist in legal battle with medical aid over claim payments

NABEELAH SHAIKH

ADURBAN pharmacist has laid a charge of intimidation and extortion against medical aid scheme Discovery Health.

She alleged Discovery attempted to extort more than R1 million from her in 2013 by falsely accusing her of making fraudulent medical aid claims from the company.

This week, pharmacist Previsa Harripershad decided it was time to pursue criminal action against the medical aid scheme.

She said she was also in the process of opening a case with the Public Protector's Office.

Harripershad, who previously owned three pharmacies in Durban, but now only has one, said the scheme had crippled her business by allegedly accusing her of a crime she did not commit.

She claimed that forensic officials coerced her into attending a "routine" meeting in 2013 about a medical aid claim she made.

Harripershad was heavily pregnant at the time and the Discovery officials assured her the meeting was "nothing serious".

She wanted her attorney to

be present at the meeting, and asked for it to be rescheduled, but the officials apparently said her attorney's presence was not necessary.

"When I went to their offices in Joburg with my husband Ravesh, they took us to a highly secured room. After having a general discussion, they placed a piece of paper on the table and said I was accused of fraud related to an irregular transaction," claimed Harripershad.

She said she was baffled and could not recall the transaction they referred to, and the transaction amount was just over R1 600. She was allegedly told that two Discovery officials with spy cameras visited her pharmacy and recorded the fraudulent transaction in question.

"I asked if I could call the pharmacy to verify the claims, as I was on maternity leave at the time, but they refused. The officials then took out an acknowledgement of debt agreement for R1 million and said we had to sign it if we didn't want action taken against us.

"We asked if we could consult with our attorney first because we were shocked at the R1m figure, but one of the officials began raising his voice," said Harripershad.

She alleged the officials then locked her in the room and said she had 15 minutes to sign the form, or else they would call the police and have her arrested," Harripershad claimed.

She added that she was under duress when she signed the acknowledgement of debt, but as soon as she was able to speak to her attorney, she placed a stop order on the payments.

Harripershad said she has been fighting the scheme in court, over their alleged unlawful action, ever since then.

She added that she has since lost two of her pharmacies as a result of Discovery Health's "dark cloud" (a crime she did not commit) hanging over her head.

The medical aid scheme stopped all claim payments to her pharmacies, she said.

"I've now approached the police after being advised by various people to do so," said Harripershad.

However, Discovery CEO, Jonathan Broomberg said the company had substantial evidence that the pharmacy had supplied members of medical schemes with non-claimable items such as baby formula, nappies, cosmetics and shoes, but submitting claims for "prescription medicines".

"There was also compelling evidence of instances where medicines were supplied to non-members and then claimed on a legitimate member's membership."

He denied that Discovery officials intimidated Harripershad and said there was no truth to the allegations.

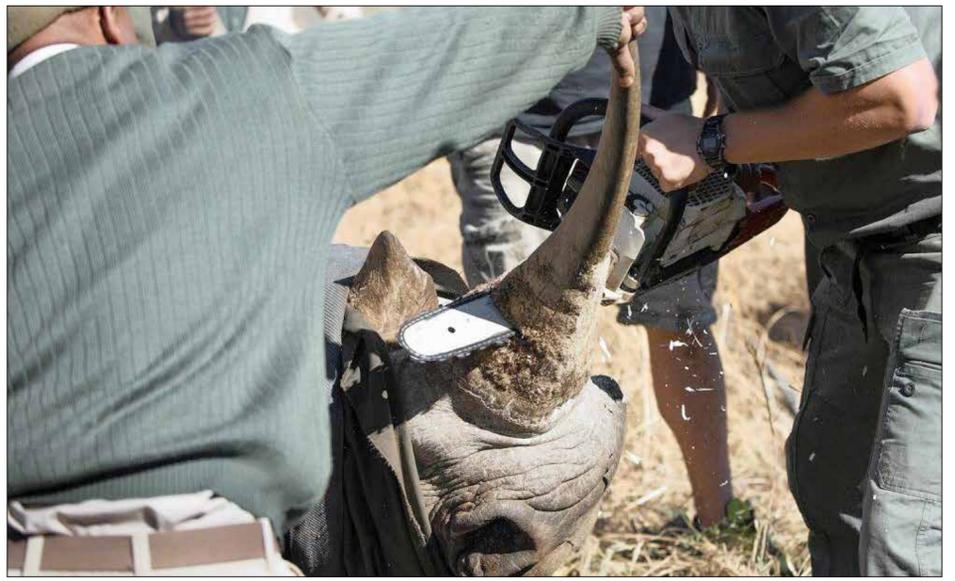
"Discovery Health's approach to investigating and dealing with fraud adheres to the very strictest standards and meets the requirements of the Medical Schemes Act and broader principles of legality.

"We have over the years invested considerable time, energy and resources to ensure that this is the case and the principles applied have been tested and approved in prior litigation and this case was no different," said Broomberg.

He said a formal complaint was lodged against Harripershad with the South African Pharmacy Council.

Gauteng SAPS spokesperson Brigadier Mathapelo Peters confirmed that Harripershad's case was received from Durban and registered at the Sandton police station.

"It will be allocated to a detective for further investigation," said Peters. nabeelah.shaiikh@inl.co.za



While a dehorned rhino is hardly a tourism attraction, de-horning these conservation icons continues to be mooted as an effective tool in combating poaching. PICTURE: CHRIS GALLIER, PROJECT RHINO

'Ban on rhino horn sales not protecting the animals'

FRED KOCKOTT

CALLS to legalise the trade in rhino horn are to come under the spotlight at this week's 2017 Symposium of Contemporary Conservation Practice, which gets under way in Howick in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands tomorrow.

More than 350 scientists, conservationists, legal experts, wildlife managers and environmentalists will gather to share ideas about what can be done to address biodiversity loss, wildlife crime, habitat destruction and pollution of the ocean and river catchments.

Organised by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife in association with Wildlands, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the symposium aims to promote greater public engagement in conservation and strengthen environmental policies and laws to ensure survival of endangered species.

This year's symposium covers a wide range of topics from converting whale watching into conservation action and the use of drones for conservation monitoring through to progress made by the Peace Parks Foundation in creating a massive transfrontier park incorporating areas of far northern KwaZulu-Natal,

Mozambique and Swaziland.

Debris pollution of the Durban harbour, the impact of microplastics on fish and the Rethink the Bag concept in addressing plastic pollution also feature on the five-day programme. What is likely to spark the most public debate, however, are calls to legalise the domestic trade in rhino horn.

While the Endangered Wildlife Trust has argued this will tarnish South Africa's international conservation reputation and potentially drive rhino populations to extinction in neighbouring countries, Pelham Jones, chairman of the Private Rhino Owners Association, says the legal trade in rhino horn would greatly benefit conservation efforts and effectively bring an end to the scourge of rhino poaching.

In a foreword to his symposium presentation, Jones quotes the much-loved doyen of conservation, the late Dr Ian Player: "To exist in an unnatural world, animals must have a commercial value that can be exploited. Without it, their chances of survival are slim."

Jones argues that the well-intended international Cites ban and domestic moratorium on trade in rhino horn has not proven successful. "These bans have not

saved the life of a single rhino and have helped create vast trans-national organised crime syndicates who profit through illegal trade in wildlife," says Jones.

Whereas rhino populations in state-owned game parks in African have been decimated, rhinos are thriving on private game reserves in South Africa, says Jones.

Twenty-three of 33 original African range states no longer have rhino, said Jones. In comparison, more than 6 500 rhinos can be found on private game reserves in South Africa - 37% of the national herd and more than the rest of Africa combined.

According to Jones, poaching pressures have recently caused more than 70 game farm owners to sell all their rhinos.

He estimates that since 2009 private reserves have spent over R2 billion on rhino security and management with little to no income.

The legal trade in rhino horn would address this, says Jones.

● To follow this debate and further coverage of this week's Symposium for Contemporary Conservation Practice, visit www.rovingreporters.co.za. Roving Reporters coverage is supported by the Human Elephant Foundation.

Funding plea for dehorning

IN THE face of escalating poaching pressures, Project Rhino, a KwaZulu-Natal based conservation coalition, is making a national and international call for funding to have about 200 rhino dehorned in KZN over the next year.

"The dehorning of rhino has proved a very effective tool in deflecting poachers," says Project Rhino founding member Dr Simon Morgan, Director of WildlifeACT.

Morgan said Project Rhino had already conducted 25 horn removals on rhino from KZN reserves since June this year, costing a total of R200 000. He said the organisation now faced requests to conduct over 200 horn removals in KZN at an approximate cost R1.6 million.

The dehorning process is conducted by an experienced wildlife veterinarian and a team of specialists. The rhino is first sedated and then the horn removed in a quick and painless procedure.

Project Rhino is offering people the opportunity to be directly involved in the dehorning programme and associated conservation work. Read more at <http://www.projectrhinokzn.org/>

Start spreading news... Vee's running in New York

NOKUTHULA NTULI

BALLITO domestic worker turned long distance runner Veronica "Vee" Mthethwa was not deterred by the terror attack that took place on Tuesday in New York. Instead, she planned to fly the South African flag high when she joins thousands of athletes in the city's marathon today.

"We are not scared but of course we will be cautious," she said yesterday.

On Tuesday Sayfullo Saipov was alleged to have deliberately driven a truck down a bike lane which claimed eight lives and resulted in several injuries. It was the first incident of terror in New York City following the 9/11 bombings.

With her employer and best



Long distance runner Veronica "Vee" Mthethwa wants to do South Africa proud by completing the NYC Marathon today.

friend Jody Cameron by her side, Mthethwa took her first international flight to the US on Thursday.

"We are obviously more aware of our surroundings so

we practise caution while we are here but we've had to deal with a lot to get here and we are focusing on the positive," said Cameron.

Mthethwa, who has been on a strict diet, said she was excited about today's race. She had a lingering foot injury but said she was ready.

The 34-year-old said it was a dream come true for her to run the NYC Marathon and she hoped it would inspire other people to follow her.

"I couldn't have come this far without Jody and Peter (Cameron). They have shown me how your employer can end up being your family. They support me in all that I do and Jody is the one who does all the running around doing fundraising and making arrangements for

me to live my dream."

She said during her "Dreaming of NY" fundraising campaign she saw the true generosity of people.

"I am still in shock. I have been blessed by over 100 people from all walks of life who have made this happen for me. I'm speechless from the kindness everyone has shown me and so grateful to be fortunate enough to have my dream come true."

She wants to use her run in New York to raise funds for Summerhill House, an NPO which runs a feeding scheme and an orphanage in Etete, outside Stanger. "We learnt very quickly that they are in need of support so we are going to do something really crazy and attempt to raise R1 million." Nokuthula.ntuli@inl.co.za



education

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PROVINCE OF KWAZULU NATAL



REGISTRATION OF LEARNERS AT MANDLA MTHETHWA SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE (BOARDING SCHOOL)

The Department of Education in KwaZulu-Natal wants to inform all parents who want to register their children for Grade 8 in 2018, that the first of its kind, state-of-the-art, Mandla Mthethwa School of Excellence, which is situated at Indumo in Ngwavuma, under Umkhanyakude District, is now ready for the 2018 learner intake. Learner admission for 2018 is going to start on 06 November 2017. Parents are urged to physically go to the school in order to register their children. Do not miss this opportunity. It's a first come first served affair!!!!

For more info Please call 035 5910 762

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Poachers kill rhino and calf

JUERGEN BAETZ & KATE BARTLETT

A PREGNANT rhino and her calf have been shot and killed by poachers at a national park in north-west South Africa, a spokesperson for the reserve says.

The 8-year-old rhino, due to give birth to a second calf in February or March, was shot alongside her 2-year-old calf on Thursday, Perry Dell from the Pilanesberg Wildlife Trust said.

The poachers fled before they were able to get to the horns as they were disturbed by a safari vehicle while in the process of cutting them off.

Photographs showed the dead rhino and calf lying next to each other, as well as the foetus, which had been taken from the rhino's body by police and forensic scientists searching for the bullets.

Sixteen rhinos had been poached at the park this year, Dell said, compared with just one or two in 2016.



A pregnant rhino and her calf have been shot and killed.

South Africa has an estimated 20 000 rhinos, the largest population in the world. About 1 050 were poached in the country last year, down from 1 175 in 2015, according to official figures.

Trading rhino horn has been globally prohibited for the past four decades, but black market trade flourishes.

The horn is particularly popular in China and Vietnam, where it is believed to have aphrodisiacal and healing powers. - dpa

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