



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemarkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT mourns death of health economics pioneer

Professor Gavin Mooney's work helped address inequities in health care policy and provision

The University of Cape Town mourns the tragic death this week of Professor Gavin Mooney, who was instrumental in developing the discipline of health economics within South Africa, and more specifically at UCT. In recognition of his international achievements he was named an honorary professor and was awarded an honorary doctorate in social sciences from the university in June 2009.

Australian media reported this week that Professor Mooney and his partner, Dr Del Weston, were both murdered in their home in Tasmania.

"Professor Mooney was one of a small band of pioneers who developed groundbreaking techniques for applying economic theory and principles to the health sector," said Professor Thandabantu Nhlapo, Acting Vice-Chancellor at UCT. "His work contributed to the establishment of UCT's Health Economics Unit (HEU) and, through his writings and personal influence, he has helped South Africa to achieve a more equitable health policy. On behalf of the university, I extend condolences to the families of Professor Mooney and Dr Weston."

Since July 2008, Professor Mooney held an honorary position in UCT's HEU and spent two or three months a year working there (initially on a Mellon mentorship) to develop the skills of HEU staff and support them in publishing their work. Dr Weston accompanied Professor Mooney on his visits to UCT and, in the course of her work on her PhD on the political economy of global warming, engaged with various UCT academics working on environmental issues.

In the late 1980s, which was a period of international isolation for South Africa under apartheid, Professor Mooney's books and articles were some of the few resources available to aspiring young health economists in South Africa. These writings helped develop their understanding of the theoretical and methodological basis for their work.

According to UCT's citation when it awarded Professor Mooney with his honorary doctorate: "Probably Professor Mooney's most important contribution has been to open up for debate the value base of the

health economics discipline. In particular, he has led the way in challenging the prevailing orthodoxy in much of health economics which prioritises concerns with efficiency over the distributional consequences of decisions. His seminal article in 1983, entitled 'Equity in health care: confronting the confusion', is still prescribed reading for health economics students as an entry point to understanding equity issues in the health sector. It is largely as a result of his efforts that the equity-efficiency trade-offs, that are so often an element of health system decision-making, are made explicit and given consideration by health economists."

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Patricia Lucas

Tel: (021) 650 5428 Fax (021) 650 5628

Cell: 076 292 8047

E-mail: pat.lucas@uct.ac.za

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Website: www.uct.ac.za