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UCT academic announced as 2018 L’Oreal-UNESCO Women in Science Laureate

Prof Heather Zar recognised for her work on child health in Africa

University of Cape Town academic Professor Heather Zar has been announced as the 2018 L’Oreal-UNESCO Women in Science Laureate for Africa and the Arab States. This is in recognition of her wide-ranging contributions to child health, which have improved – and saved – children’s lives across the globe, as well as helping to shape international policy.

The prestigious award is given annually to five women scientists’ worldwide, one from each continent.

Prof Zar is the Chair: Department of Paediatrics and Child Health as well as the Director of the South African Medical Research Council Unit on Child and Adolescent Health at Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital.

Commenting on this honour, Prof Zar said: “It is humbling to be counted amongst such amazing women scientists, and a really wonderful acknowledgement of the work we’ve been doing in child health over many years. The award reflects the extraordinary teams and people I’m fortunate to work with and the strong collaborations that we’ve built.”

Respiratory illnesses, such as pneumonia, tuberculosis (TB) and asthma are leading causes of mortality and debilitating illness in children worldwide, especially for children in Africa. These illnesses are also a serious complication in HIV-infected children.

Prof Zar has devoted much of her working life to finding ways to tackle these conditions, and to developing capacity in Africa in this field.

This award acknowledges her outstanding contributions in the epidemiology, diagnosis, prevention and management of respiratory illnesses, achieving reductions in childhood

mortality globally, as well as for establishing a cutting-edge research programme in pneumonia, TB and asthma.

Prof Zar's work focuses on key illnesses that cause most childhood deaths and disease in Africa and globally, including childhood pneumonia, TB, HIV-associated diseases and asthma. Her work has identified new methods for diagnosis and prevention and provided new knowledge on the causes and long-term impact. In asthma, epidemiological studies have delineated the large burden of childhood asthma in Africa. Prof Zar is well known for her innovation in the development of a low-cost alternative to spacers for asthma, using a simple 500ml plastic cooldrink bottle.

Possibly her most important work has been establishing the Drakenstein child health study. This unique birth cohort study is among the first in Africa to investigate comprehensively the early life determinants of child health and the link between early life illness and development of chronic disease. This study encompasses basic science, epidemiological, clinical science and public health aspects and is underpinned by strong measures of the social and biological determinants of health. Such novel research provides new knowledge to inform strategies for improved prevention and treatment of childhood illness.

This body of work has had a big impact on child health, improving management and prevention of childhood illnesses, and changing policy and international practice guidelines, including those produced by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

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