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## **The workplace environment can lead to ill-health, UCT academic warns**

When patients seek treatment for a disease or illness, doctors rarely pick up that the illness has something to do with their work environment. This is the observation of Dr Itumeleng Ntatamala, a medical doctor specialising in Occupational Medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

Ironically, this is what motivates him to wake up and go to work every day. Ntatamala was recently named in the Mail & Guardian's prestigious list of 200 Young South African trailblazers to watch out for. He was selected from amongst 6000 outstanding nominees, under the age of 35, across South Africa.

"Very often, when patients present to us, we focus on the disease or illness that they come to us with, but hardly ever ask if what they are presenting with could actually be attributable to work or related to the workplace," says Ntatamala. He believes occupational health, which is concerned with the study, diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease and ill-health attributable to work is an often neglected area within the health sciences.

Occupational health awareness is particularly relevant in the South African context where unemployment rates are very high and there is a tendency amongst some employers to ignore the health and safety of their employees. He believes that while all workers in South Africa are exposed to a variety of hazards, one of the most under-reported are psychosocial hazards and the problems associated with mental health in the workplace.

Ntatamala graduated as a medical doctor from UCT in 2012, and completed a master's degree in occupational health at the University of Birmingham. He is currently studying towards a master's degree in medicine and working in the Department of Occupational Medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital and in the Health Impact Assessment Unit of the Western Cape Department of Health.

His current research focuses on post-traumatic stress disorder among Emergency Medical Services personnel who not only work under enormous pressure but are also faced with daily threats to their lives – including the risk of being violently attacked while on duty.

After completing his training in occupational medicine, he aims to pursue a PhD further exploring the connection between health and work and advocating for patients' rights within this area.

Ntatamala credits UCT as having played a vital role in his success. He recalls a lecture he attended during his second year as a medical student for piquing his interest in occupational medicine and the importance of understanding how work and the workplace can impact on health.

He says he was "honoured" to make the top 200 as it affirms his belief that young people can make a valuable contribution toward building and improving our country. "There's obviously a lot to learn, but it is an indication that you are on the right path and that one should continue despite the challenges to do our very best, not only for the patients that we see, but in general, within the country".

He is optimistic about the future of young people in South Africa and believes that young people should grab opportunities that arise. "I think the future for young people is bright but I also believe that it really is dependent on what we do as young people. I'm always inspired by the Fees Must Fall movement and how young people were able, through persistence, to change the way in which funding within higher education has now evolved."

***ENDS***

***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

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