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Two UCT doctoral candidates receive L'Oréal-UNESCO award for driving African research

Two University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD candidates: Doaa Ali from the Department of Chemistry and Tsaone Tamuhla from the Department of Computational Biology, are recipients of the L'Oréal-UNESCO for Women in Science sub-Saharan Africa regional program Young Talent Awards.

This program identifies and rewards young talented researchers in the formal sciences, life and environmental sciences, material sciences, engineering sciences and technological sciences with the aim of promoting and encouraging the participation of young African women in science.

Garlic is well known as a food and medicinal plant that has been used in folk medicine since early times for its beneficial health effects, which include protection against cancer. Ali is working on the development of new cancer treatments using a ground-breaking synthetic methodology based on garlic-like compounds which are able to fight cancer cells.

During 2017-2018 she developed a new synthesis methodology for accessing specific chemical constituents in garlic which was published in the prestigious *Journal of Organic Chemistry* in early 2019. She and her colleagues have used this method which is extremely fast – complete within approximately 30 seconds to a minute – to further develop an understanding towards the design of superior and novel active anti-cancer agents.

She shared: "It was an amazing moment when I found out that I had been selected as one of the winners of this award. That moment was literally filled with happiness and excitement. Once I had gained my balance again, I began thinking of my own journey and how this achievement might encourage other young African women to pursue a career in science, particularly those coming from a developing country such as mine in the Sudan. I am still me, for sure, but this award has given me the confidence to dream about what might be possible in Africa, my beloved continent. I am much more secure now in believing that I can go on from here and run an independent research group within the continent. We shall see!"

Tamuhla is collecting clinical and genetic data to better understand the emerging pandemic of type 2 diabetes in Africa. Until recently limited data was available for human genomes from Africa but increasing volumes of such data are now being generated along with an increasing collection of electronic routine health data. Her research project will demonstrate the power and utility of integrating routine healthcare data with genomic data to identify genetic drivers of disease in African populations.

As Africa makes advances in human genomics and moves towards precision medicine, she believes the knowledge and skills she is gaining from her multi-disciplinary PhD, will place her in a position to conduct quality research that will not only add to the body of knowledge but influence health policy and patient care and ultimately improve patient outcomes.

On receiving the award Tamuhla shared: "In research, we are often plagued by imposter syndrome, so being the recipient of an award that recognises academic and research excellence and exclusively seeks to elevate women in science has been a huge positive affirmation which has empowered me to truly appreciate the importance of my research in the grand scheme of things."

Both Ali and Tamuhla have aspirations of taking their research even further and proving that Africa can continue being a leader in scientific research.



Doaa Ali

Photo: Doaa Ali

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Tsaone Tamuhla

Photo: Tsaone Tamuhla

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