



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

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

18 June 2021

UCT's 24-year-old academic encourages the youth to find their passion

The first time Jeshika Luckrajh held a dissection scalpel she knew where her future lay. This Youth Month, the lecturer in clinical anatomy at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) [Department of Human Biology](#), talks about her steep trajectory into academia at the age of just 23 (she's now 24) and the importance of mentors.

Luckrajh joined UCT as a lecturer in clinical anatomy just before lockdown last year and teaches anatomy to first, second- and third-year students on the medical campus. This is when they first learn to dissect a human cadaver – head to toe – which is essential to their training. She is also convenor of the first-year health and rehabilitation anatomy course and supervises honours and master's students.

Luckrajh studied clinical anatomy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, graduating with a master's degree aged only 22; the first to graduate from university in her family. This she owes to her parents and the sacrifices they made, she said. With four children and one breadwinner in their home, they ensured she attended a good school and university, the platform for what was to come.

As a message to the youth, Luckrajh emphasised each person should take time to find out what motivates and immerses them. For her, family was her motivation.

"Everyone is different and things that motivate us are different, but if you're able to find what it is that motivates you to keep going and focus on that, it's amazing what you'll be able to achieve."

Her love for clinical anatomy and cadaveric dissection is evident. She explained that there's far more to clinical anatomy research, right down to the molecular structures that makes the human body tick. "I can spend hours reading research articles, I am amazed by the intricacies of the human body. And it is so important for us to do research using samples from our population and release South African data out to the world."

It was in biology class at school that she had discovered the intricacies of the body and how it all fitted together, particularly the vascular system that operated like rivers and tributaries to feed the heart, brain and organs.

"Everything is so perfectly designed. Every system works together to make this perfectly functioning human," said Luckrajh.

Studying clinical anatomy at university level deepened her appreciation of just how finely tuned human anatomy is. "The first time I held that scalpel and cut into a body, that just sealed the deal. There was never any looking back. It was the most amazing experience ever." It was not death but life she was looking at.

"The first time I opened a human skull and removed the brain, I realised I held a person's entire life: their thoughts and memories, their emotions, their feelings, everything they did, it was right there."

By her honours year, Luckrajh still wasn't sure how she would make a career of anatomy, but she raised her hand for part-time jobs as a research assistant, tutor and academic mentor, keen to learn – and supplement her modest student funding. She didn't dawdle either. In 2019, Luckrajh finished her master's degree, graduating in September. Rapid-fire events saw her appointed as a clinical anatomy lecturer at UCT just three months later.

It was a daunting experience, said Luckrajh. Fresh out of university, she found herself in Cape Town in November, in an interview, giving a presentation to an intimidatingly senior group of academics and clinicians in the Faculty of Health Sciences.

By December, UCT had signed her up. It meant some seismic changes in her life. At 23, Luckrajh had never lived outside her family home. But on 26 December 2019, she arrived in Cape Town and started work in January 2020. Relocation was very difficult.

Two months later, having barely unpacked, lockdown was announced. Luckrajh returned to Durban and learnt to work remotely. Pictures of cadaveric specimens were put online. New software programmes aided teaching and helped students adapt to a brave new world. She was able to return to UCT and her lab only in March 2021, at the start of the new academic year. She shared how she has benefitted from highly supportive colleagues in the department who made sure she was adapting to a new city and a new role. That mentorship is essential for new academics.

"It was invaluable to know that I had supportive colleagues who would always be ready to listen, answer my questions and generally check up on my wellbeing. I've felt very supported."

Luckrajh has also been able to publish five papers. The biggest implications of research like hers is for surgeons, she said. In her master's, she investigated a 2 mm-long artery, which is the most common site of aneurysm in the brain.

"We found that arteries leading to the point of the aneurysm may be a millimetre or so smaller in diameter, we call it hypoplastic; it hadn't developed as much. This may be a possible anatomical reason for the formation of the aneurysm. So, while the surgeon goes in to fix the problem, the clinical anatomist studies the anatomy of the artery to see variations and give any anatomical explanation."

Being a published researcher helps. "You know, academia is really tough. But if you love your field, and you have this passion for the science, you focus, you persevere. And you go, go, go."

Luckrajh has presented her work at several national and international conferences and expressed her love for teaching anatomy and telling people about its role in our everyday lives. The rewards are starting to flow; even in the notes from students that affirm her and her teaching. One wrote, "Thank you so much for going through those lectures so slowly and in detail. You know, human biology always gets me, but I really enjoyed the section."

In terms of plans, Luckrajh is endeavouring to begin her PhD and continuing her academic trajectory.

Written by Helen Swingler, UCT News



Jeshika Luckrajh

Photo: Lerato Maduna/UCT

[Download images](#)

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Aamirah Sondag

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5427

Email: aamirah.sondag@uct.ac.za

Website: www.uct.ac.za