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UCT drug discovery trailblazer honoured among innovative black biotech leaders

Professor Kelly Chibale, the founder and director of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Drug Discovery and Development Centre (H3D), has been named among 22 rising black biotech leaders in the [Timmerman Report](#), published in the United States (US). Professor Chibale is the only Africa-based scientist included in the group.

The list was published to honour innovative black biotech leaders who are changemakers in their fields. Its publication marked Juneteenth (sometimes called Black Independence Day) on 19 June, a US federal holiday commemorating the emancipation of African-American slaves in 1863.

Chibale has received worldwide recognition for his work. In 2018, Fortune magazine named him one of the World's 50 Greatest Leaders. The UCT National Research Foundation A-rated researcher said he was honoured by the latest acknowledgement.

"As a hardcore natural scientist and entrepreneur, I believe in the power of science to transform lives and create jobs," he said. "Encouraging, supporting and incentivising scientific entrepreneurship will help move the continent of Africa forward."

The listing also affirms Chibale's vision to seed an innovative pharmaceutical research and development (R&D) industry in Africa. "I am relentless when it comes to pursuing this vision. For our work and lab, it shows [that] what we do collectively is world-class."

Chibale said he hopes it will inspire and encourage other black researchers to use the disadvantage they feel and/or experience on the basis of their race as an advantage. "Despite the "real boundaries" to black scientists, one has to make a personal choice," he said.

"I choose to focus on doing what depends on me to do, while being grateful for any opportunity I am given. The beauty of freedom in academia and independent research is that no one can stop me from thinking or coming up with research ideas and attracting funding from anywhere in the world to push my research ideas.

"I choose to use any boundaries, along with a deep sense of responsibility and gratitude, as a source of motivation, to be an inspirational role model for sustained world-class performance and excellence," he said.

Build locally

Chibale said that youth from various ethnic, social and economic backgrounds need “inspirational role models who stand for world-class excellence in whatever they do, including in leadership and politics”.

The fact that he is the only Africa-based researcher on the list was significant in this regard. “It’s a big deal for me and UCT to be singled out in the US – arguably the biotech hub of the world. It is very special. The consistently world-class work my team does has put UCT, South Africa and Africa on the world map in drug discovery. The world has taken notice of what is coming out of Africa! To quote the Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 CE), *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*, or ‘Out of Africa, there is always something new’.”

“There are three key aspects to this,” he added.

“First, Africa needs science, not aid, to contribute to sustainable economic growth and tackle health challenges such as those posed by COVID-19. Africa needs to develop and/or strengthen her capacity to use science for the benefit of all who live on the continent. Second, there is a need for us Africans to contribute solutions to unmet medical needs and drive job creation. Third, the emergence of COVID-19 has reinforced the need to build locally.”

African biotech for the future

COVID-19 has also illuminated the need for ‘homegrown’ biotech skills, especially in vaccine and therapeutics development – and the development of new drugs to treat malaria, tuberculosis and HIV, which are still rife on the continent.

Chibale said: “To provide sustainable health innovation solutions and prepare for future pandemics, we in Africa need to accelerate and scale up investments in health systems as well as health innovation in terms of R&D, so we can one day produce our own vaccines and therapeutics – just like countries like China are currently doing.

“This is so that in future we don’t need to advocate for vaccine equity. Health innovation requires a critical mass of ‘homegrown’ skills. But one of the most difficult conundrums towards a critical mass of ‘homegrown’ skills is how to create an absorptive capacity to identify, attract, develop and retain talent.”

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News



Prof Kelly Chibale

Photo: Je'nine May

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