



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

2 December 2022

UCT's heart disease doyens share prestigious Alan Pifer award

Heart-health pioneers Professors Karen Sliwa and Liesl Zühlke are the recipients of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) prestigious 2021 Alan Pifer award.

The award is the Vice-Chancellor's (VC) annual prize that rewards outstanding welfare-related research. It also highlights UCT's strategic goal of promoting socially responsive research, while honouring those who have helped advance the welfare of disadvantaged South Africans.

This year's winners were recognised at both the UCT Staff Annual Awards 2022 dinner, to honour exceptional UCT staff for their dedication and excellence in research, teaching and service, and at the UCT Research Excellence for Change annual research celebration.

Professor Karen Sliwa



UCT VC Prof Mamokgethi Phakeng (left) with Prof Karen Sliwa.
Ngcobo

Photo: Phumla

Sliwa is renowned for her career-long dedication to addressing heart-health challenges common in Africa, especially among pregnant women. She is hailed for her consistent success in drawing attention to the impact of heart failure on younger and middle-aged people in low- and middle-income countries – as opposed to the elderly in more affluent countries. She is also lauded for a discovery that changed the face of treatment and outcomes for patients with a specific form of pregnancy-associated heart failure common among African women.

“This award is particularly special to me as it recognises the unique medical conditions we have in South Africa and Africa, and how well-planned studies can improve patient care,” says Sliwa. “With this award, I hope I can encourage many more young researchers to work in areas relevant to South Africa and Africa, and can’t wait to witness their great discoveries and contributions to society.”

A past president of the World Heart Federation and chair of the Neglected Cardiovascular Disease group, Sliwa’s scholarship has informed the development of a plethora of national and global policy and guidelines for heart disease, while significantly impacting research-capacity generation through the training of postgraduate students from South Africa and further north in Africa.

Sliwa, director of the Cape Heart Institute based at UCT’s Faculty of Health Sciences, describes herself as a clinician-scientist. Born in Germany, she trained as an internal medicine specialist and cardiologist, obtaining a Diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, and a PhD related to immune activation in heart failure from the University of the Witwatersrand.

Her endeavours as a clinical cardiologist for pregnant women with heart disease at Groote Schuur Hospital prompted her seminal breakthrough in the field of peripartum cardiomyopathy. She researched the area for nearly three decades in a bid to identify the underlying mechanism detrimentally impacting the heart muscles of many pregnant African women – and practical interventions to address death rates as high as 15%.

Professor Liesl Zühlke



Prof Liesl Zühlke with Prof Phakeng.

Photo: Phumla Ngcobo

A paediatric cardiologist and renowned continental leader in cardiovascular medicine, Zühlke has recorded several exceptional scientific breakthroughs in her focus areas of rheumatic heart disease (RHD) and congenital heart disease (CHD) with a considerable, measurable impact on heart health in Africa and internationally.

"This award recognises the efforts of a team that is dedicated to conducting, supporting and empowering children's heart disease research – with a special focus on the needs of Africa," says Zühlke. "I hope it will help highlight the needs of the most vulnerable population – children – within the massive burden of cardiovascular disease, which is the number one global killer."

"I am deeply grateful to the VC and UCT for this award, which recognises my research focus on addressing the key challenges facing children with RHD and CHD, improving outcomes, and fostering collaborative, equitable and responsive partnerships," she says.

Zühlke also made a substantial contribution to the passing of a historic World Health Organisation Resolution on RHD in 2018, recognising rheumatic fever and RHD as global priorities for the first time.

At the end of 2021, Zühlke joined the South African Medical Research Council as vice president of its extramural research and internal portfolio, from UCT, where she was the acting deputy dean of research in the Faculty of Health Sciences. She retains her UCT affiliation with the Department of Paediatric Cardiology at Red Cross Children's Hospital and continues as director of the Children's Heart Disease Research Unit. She is also continuing her research as a member of UCT's Department of Paediatrics and Child Health.

Along with her focus on RHD and CHD, Zühlke's research spans HIV in adolescents, grown-up congenital heart disease and cardiac disease in women of child-bearing age.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison Assistant
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za