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UCT research directed at focusing on care for the elderly

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Professor Elena Moore has been awarded a prestigious Wellcome Career Development Award that will bolster a unique five-year research programme that places older people in southern Africa at the top of its priority list.

Moore is a professor in sociology, she plans to use the award to develop her Family Care of Older Persons in Southern Africa programme – a research programme that will explore and provide a better understanding of the meaning of family care for older people in southern Africa.

"I am delighted by this award. What it means is that I can now continue to build and develop the Family Care of Older Persons in Southern Africa research programme by exploring and better understanding the social dynamics involved in family caregiving of older persons," Moore said.

"Although this is an individual award, it allows us to continue to build strong collaborations with a range of stakeholders on how best to embark on a wider research programme."

The award is an initiative of the Wellcome Foundation – a global charitable foundation that supports research into life, health and well-being. It provides funding to mid-career researchers from any discipline who have the potential to be international research leaders. According to the foundation, the goal of the award is to develop scholars' research capabilities, drive innovative programmes of work, and deliver significant shifts in understanding that could improve human life, health and well-being.

The programme's roots are in the [Care of Older Persons in Southern Africa Network \(COPSAN\)](#) – a network of scholars, government officials and civil society organisations who work in ageing research and who are determined to address challenges related to aged care provision in the region. Moore has collaborated with academics at the University of Namibia, the University of Botswana and the University of Malawi, as well as the Samson Institute for Ageing Research, for this research study.

Startling statistic

According to Moore, the population aged 60 years and older in sub-Saharan Africa is increasing faster than in any other region in the world. And health and state systems are not adequately prepared for this rapidly ageing population, as well as the increase in non-communicable diseases that continue to afflict the region. Sadly, she said, virtually no elder-care provisions exist, and a limited number of social protection mechanisms are in place to support senior citizens.

“Older persons in the region are heavily dependent on family care. Yet, we don’t have a sociological understanding of how family care takes place in different households across the region. If we want to understand how we can support ageing populations, we need to understand family care practises of older persons first,” she said.

Moore’s research programme will kick-start this work. The multi-layered programme aims to advance the empirical and theoretical understanding of family care of older people across southern Africa. It also seeks to understand certain challenges by examining how the household care economy operates and how different household members experience care practises.

Unpacking the meaning of family care

The four-country-based study will explore who provides financial, practical and social support for older persons and the types of care various parties like family members, the community and the state are responsible for. How older people experience this care and how it differs when compared to different socio-economic backgrounds also forms part of the work. Ultimately, Moore said, the aim is to understand how best to provide accessible, quality care and support for the elderly and to ensure that their well-being is prioritised in order for them to continue leading meaningful lives.

Creating awareness

Moore said creating the necessary awareness of the challenges families of older persons face, especially those that relate to caring for family members and how to improve their overall health and well-being, is a cornerstone of the project. But Moore’s work in this area does not stand on its own. As a result of the rapid increase in older people in southern Africa, she said, prioritising this marginalised sector has become a focus for policymakers locally and abroad. As such, in response to population ageing, several international and regional frameworks – including the United Nations’ Decade for Healthy Ageing and the African Union’s Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing, have already been developed.

“Despite this, there is very little progress in developing and implementing policy and programmatic responses to assist family caregivers and home-based carers who are essential to improving the health and well-being of older persons, which is where I’m hoping our research will assist,” Moore said.

Adopting a public participation process to produce the necessary data is critical. She said actively engaging with members of the public via various local, regional and international organisations and the media will help everyone improve their understanding of family care, and improve the well-being of the elderly.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News.



Professor Elena Moore
Je'nine May

Photo:

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