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## **UCT to play key role to boost TB research and accelerate capacity development at Univen**



Partnership to boost local TB research

Photo: Supplied

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Holistic Drug Discovery and Development Unit (H3D) has announced a new partnership in which the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), through its Strategic Health Innovation Partnerships (SHIP) programme, will award a grant to the University of Venda (UNIVEN) chemistry department to boost local tuberculosis (TB) research. This will also accelerate capacity development at the university.

Valued at approximately R2.4 million over a period of three years, the grant will support a project titled "TB Drug Discovery capacity development project". The project is led by Univen's Professor Isaiah David Ipfani Ramaite, whose role will be Principal Investigator (PI)

and he will be supported by UCT's H3D. The centre is led by UCT's Prof Kelly Chibale and is in line with SHIP's capacity-building agenda which purposes to support partnerships between historically disadvantaged individuals, established researchers and institutions.

The SHIP grant is a partnership between the SAMRC and the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI). The DSI funds and manages innovative projects that are focused on the development of new drugs, treatments, vaccines, medical devices and prevention strategies. The programme has also developed initiatives to intensify transformation and capacity development in research and innovation in South Africa. The strengthening of transformation and capacity development has led to the building of a strategy that aims to increase support for historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs).

A similar partnership was entered into with the University of Limpopo (UL) last year.

"We need to bolster South African science's abilities to research and develop novel or enhanced drugs, vaccines, diagnostics, and medical devices for the priority diseases. By partnering with local universities, science councils, and the private sector, we can enhance the transfer of research findings into improved health results and social advantages. It is crucial to take a proactive approach to manage and coordinate health innovation in South Africa, especially within the areas of strategic disease and technology focus. We should aim to search for, handle, and finance multi-faceted and multi-institutional research, development, and innovation initiatives. This is what SHIP is mostly about," says SAMRC President and CEO, Professor Glenda Gray.

Professor Chibale, a close associate of the SAMRC and director of its extramural research unit, H3D, says: "H3D is delighted to be partnering with the University of Venda as we continue on the journey of capacity building and strengthening at HDIs. This partnership is another step towards our transformative agenda, which aims to develop a critical mass of skilled South African scientists and future leaders in innovative pharmaceutical research and development."

The project will extend the scope of ongoing research of synthesizing novel heterocyclic compounds that are being tested for activity against *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mtb), the causative agent of TB. These active compounds have now been identified as starting points and research is ongoing to chemically modify them in order to generate derivatives with a potentially improved activity and safety profile to identify quality leads suitable for optimisation and selection as potential agents for the treatment of both drug sensitive and resistant TB.

During the three years, the partnership will enable postgraduate students from Univen to design and synthesise compounds and gain access to the expertise and infrastructure at H3D. These students will do this to evaluate the biological activity of the synthesised compounds on a regular basis. H3D's medicinal chemists will also provide input on the design of the compounds. In order to accelerate capacity development at Univen, the postgraduate students will also be supported to spend time at H3D, where they will receive training and mentoring.

Welcoming the news of the award, Professor Ramaite says: "This investment is of enormous value for the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture and the entire university as it will equip our prestigious university and postgraduate students with necessary resources to undertake focused research related to a disease that is still a leading cause of fatalities in our nation. The provision of aid for capacity building is indeed a cherished initiative and is in

line with our institution new strategic plan to position the institution for impact and relevance.”

***Ends***

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