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Young UCT researcher to address “woefully underdeveloped” vaccination targeting pregnant women

[Dr Edina Amponsah-Dacosta](#), a research officer at the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) [Vaccines for Africa Initiative \(VACFA\)](#), has been awarded a grant of R400 000 from the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC). This funding will support a pivotal two-year study titled “Characterizing vaccine confidence among pregnant women and its association with the uptake of early childhood routine vaccination.”

The grant was awarded under SAMRC’s Self-initiated Research (SIR) Grants Programme, designed to support original research initiated by a researcher at a recognised research institution in various areas of health. SIR grants are up to R200 000 per year for a maximum period of three years.

A first-of-its-kind study in South Africa

The study, which commenced earlier this month and is scheduled to run until July 2026, is led by researchers at VACFA within UCT’s School of Public Health. [Dr Imen Ayouni Ep Labidi](#), a dedicated PhD student, is spearheading the core objectives of this study, with support from a distinguished supervisory team that includes Amponsah-Dacosta, [Professor Rudzani Muloiwa](#) and [Associate Professor Benjamin Kagina](#).

“Pregnant women and their children are particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases. These diseases are linked with significant morbidity and mortality for both mom and baby. Luckily, infectious diseases like tetanus, influenza, pertussis, and COVID-19 are all vaccine-preventable during pregnancy.

“Unfortunately, vaccination programmes that target pregnant women are woefully underdeveloped. They are also underutilised, especially in South Africa. Furthermore, our understanding of how pregnant women make decisions about vaccination is poor,” said Amponsah-Dacosta.

To address these gaps, Amponsah-Dacosta said they will conduct a research study among pregnant women presenting for antenatal care services in health facilities within the Western Cape. “We also plan to capture the knowledge and perspectives of their healthcare providers who work in maternal and immunisation services. Through this research, we will elevate the voices and experiences of pregnant women regarding vaccination during pregnancy,” she added.

Amponsah-Dacosta said the study will also provide much-needed local data on the coverage of vaccines recommended for pregnant women and their infants. "Such data has so far been scarce. The anticipated findings will enhance rational resource allocation and evidence-based policy formulation on maternal vaccination programmes in South Africa," she added.

This research work is the first-of-its-kind study in South Africa. "We have recently completed a pilot project with funding from a UCT Faculty of Health Sciences Start-Up Emerging Researcher Award I received in July 2023. Our preliminary findings on the knowledge, awareness, and practices of women regarding vaccination during pregnancy have been very insightful, and we will be publishing these in the coming months," said Amponsah-Dacosta.

NRF rating – a benchmark for research excellence

Amponsah-Dacosta, who was recently recognised as a Y2-rated researcher by the National Research Foundation (NRF), said she was delighted to hear about the outcome of her application for SAMRC's SIR Grants Programme. "The funding awarded will be pivotal to the successful execution of this planned research work and my personal capacity development as I establish an independent research career," she added.

Joining the prestigious ranks of NRF-rated researchers is a significant career achievement, shared Amponsah-Dacosta. "The rating process itself is very rigorous, so this is the fruit of several years of hard work, mentorship, and support. Being nationally recognised as a Y2-rated researcher affirms the opinions of peers and experts in my field about the quality of my research outputs and my potential to establish an independent research career and further contribute to advancing scientific scholarship in South Africa. This rating will unlock further grant opportunities, allowing me to support additional postgraduate students and strengthen the capacity of the emerging crop of South African scientists."



Dr Edina Amponsah-Dacosta

Photo: Supplied

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