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UCT leads Africa to the global stage through hosting of world epidemiology congress

Drug safety among topics to be discussed following vaccine hesitancy challenges during COVID-19

The University of Cape Town (UCT) will spearhead Africa's role in global health by hosting the World Congress of Epidemiology (WCE2024) at the Cape Town International Convention Centre from 24 to 27 September 2024. For the first time in the event's history, this renowned gathering, organised by the International Epidemiological Association, will be held on African soil, with over 1 200 delegates expected to attend. The theme for this year's Congress is "Epidemiology and complexity: challenges and responses".

Epidemiology, the scientific study of health conditions within populations, gained international prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. UCT, a leader in public health and epidemiological research, was at the forefront, with South African scientists demonstrating excellence rooted in decades of work combating diseases such as HIV, TB, and malaria. WCE2024 will highlight pioneering research from 108 countries, including 39 from Africa, solidifying UCT's position as a hub of global health innovation and Africa's premier university.

The congress will address critical global health issues, including the impact of climate change on infectious diseases, pandemic preparedness, digital epidemiology, and the ethics surrounding big data. It will also focus on pharmacoepidemiology — the study of drug safety, a topic of renewed importance following the challenges of vaccine hesitancy during COVID-19.

Scientific director of WCE2024 and a distinguished researcher at UCT's [Division of Epidemiology and Biostatistics](#) Dr Thokozile Malaba emphasised the significance of hosting the congress in Africa. "UCT is honoured to bring this vital event to our continent, recognising Africa's central role in advancing global health. Africa carries a huge burden of disease, so to have this meeting here promotes equitable participation. Often people don't realise that a lot of the groundbreaking scientific discoveries are being led by Africans," said Malaba.

She said hosting the 23rd iteration of the meeting in Africa recognised the continent's key role in growing the field. While global epidemiological collaborations are often funded through foreign grants, much of the legwork is done in Africa.

She further hoped that WCE2024 would spark new collaborations, particularly among institutions in the Global South. "While much of the global health landscape involves North-to-South collaboration, UCT is keen to foster more South-to-North and South-to-South partnerships, showcasing African leadership in epidemiology," she added.

The theme of WCE2024 will be explored through six plenary lectures, over 300 oral presentations, and workshops across four days.

Key highlights, as elaborates on by Malaba, include:

- Climate change and health. "The impact of climate change; including its role in the spread of infectious diseases, heat related illnesses, and mental health challenges. We will look at epidemiological methods to measure that, and ways to mitigate the impacts of climate change on health."
- Pandemic preparedness. "Given that we're coming out of COVID-19, what are the lessons learned – not just from COVID-19, but past pandemics? So this relates to epidemiological response, vaccine rollouts, public health infrastructure challenges. Getting global perspectives: hearing from different places, how did you deal with it? These were the impacts of the choices made – publicising these lessons."
- Digital epidemiology and big data. "The role of big data, AI and machine learning in transforming epidemiology and public health. It is exciting to have access to all these different data sources – how we use that data, and also the ethics around how we use that data."
- Capacity building and training. "This comes down to Africa again, and other low- and middle-income countries. Strengthening epidemiological training programmes so that we can build our own capacity and expertise. Again, how can we lead and not just be told what to do."
- Pharmacoepidemiology and drug surveillance. "This session will bring together discussions around drug safety and real world evidence – the processes that go into drug development, what are the steps before roll-out, making sure that medicines are safe and effective."

Malaba's journey is a testament to UCT's impact on the global stage. Born in Harare and having completed part of her education in Oslo, she recently earned her PhD from UCT, with a thesis focusing on maternal ART use and adverse birth outcomes. Earlier this year, she presented her research at the prestigious Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections in Denver, USA.

Media accreditation for the WCE2024 is open. Please RSVP via [email](#).

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