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UCT's Professor Lubbe shares global innovations in head and neck surgery



Professor Darlene Lubbe during her inaugural lecture.

Photo: Lerato Maduna

A spray of blood hit her face and filled her mouth. Professor Darlene Lubbe was a young doctor standing over a man with uncontrolled nosebleeds when she realised the true nature of surgery.

"It went straight into my eyes and mouth," she recalled during her inaugural lecture titled "Otolaryngology Through a South African Lens – Journeys, Innovations and Global Perspectives", at the University of Cape Town (UCT) on Thursday, 28 August 2025. "I had to swallow it down and keep going. That's when you realise: this is not glamorous. This is grit."

That raw moment set the tone for a lecture that traced her evolution from a medical student once labelled a “dark horse” to a globally recognised pioneer in head and neck surgery.

A journey of resilience

Lubbe described herself as an average student in her early years. “I was happy with 65%,” she said, drawing laughter from an audience that included patients, colleagues, students and family. Her passion for surgery, however, transformed her. “Suddenly, there was nothing they could ask me that I hadn’t read. I just loved it.”

Although she won the surgery prize, she rejected a fast-tracked neurosurgery post to pursue what she loved, influenced by her father, a cardiac surgeon who taught her teamwork and precision.

Her journey included failure. Lubbe recalled disappearing for months after failing an exam. That experience shaped her empathy for her students. Her background as a world-class athlete also contributed to her resilience. “Sport during your career makes a massive difference,” she reflected. “It teaches you how to balance long hours and still show up the next day.”

Mentorship and teamwork

Lubbe highlighted the mentors who shaped her career, particularly the late Austrian surgeon Professor Heinz Stammberger, known as the “God of sinus surgery”.

She illustrated mentorship’s impact through a story of a young mother with aggressive nasal cancer treated more than 20 years ago. Without access to navigation systems, Lubbe performed a pioneering procedure with international guidance. The patient, now cancer-free, attended the lecture with her daughters. “That is the value of mentorship,” she said. “You may never know the thousands of lives you save through others.”

Lubbe paid tribute to her surgical teams, including scrub nurse Sister Reetsberg, who worked beside her for nearly two decades. “We had a sign language that no one else could understand,” she said. “She knew exactly what instrument I needed before I asked. That’s what teamwork looks like.”

Innovations born from necessity

Working in a resource-limited environment has driven Lubbe’s innovations. She and her team developed techniques that are now recognised internationally.

- They shortened skull-base tumour surgeries by building 3D models and operating through the nose and orbit in parallel, preserving patients’ vision.
- They refined balloon dilation for children with airway narrowing, preventing the need for invasive tracheostomies. This work won international recognition and a US medical design award.
- They introduced sclerotherapy for hereditary hemorrhagic telangiectasia, a rare disorder causing severe nosebleeds. “The results have been phenomenal,” she said. “Patients who were housebound from constant bleeding are now living normal lives.”

Global leader in transorbital surgery

Lubbe is also a pioneer of transorbital surgery, operating through the eye socket to reach skull-base tumours. She was among the first eyes, nose, and throat (ENT) surgeons worldwide, and the first woman in her field, to help develop this technique with Professor Kris Moe at the University of Washington.

She now directs the Karl Storz Sub-Saharan Endoscopic Sinus and Skull Base Surgery Programme, training surgeons internationally and expanding expertise across Africa.

Building surgical capacity in Africa

Lubbe emphasised her commitment to training. Through fellowships and international collaborations, she has mentored surgeons from Kenya, Namibia, Oman, and Turkey.

"We didn't train them to do it like us," she said. "We trained them to do it better than us. And that's exactly what they're doing."

Despite offers from abroad, she has chosen to remain in South Africa. "This is where I'm meant to be," she said. "Building surgical capacity here matters more than anything else."

Lubbe credited every breakthrough to collaboration and faith. "If you don't work with a team, you can't have an impact," she said. She described her achievements as "a gift born of necessity, persistence and community".

Her humility stood out as she closed her lecture: "I absolutely love what I do. And I've been incredibly lucky – lucky to learn from great mentors, lucky to work with amazing teams, and lucky to do work that saves lives. That's all I could ever have wished for."

Story by Myolisi Gophe, UCT News.

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