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UCT academy graduates women living with multiple chronic conditions as health advocates



About 13 women living with multiple long-term conditions donned their graduation gowns to mark the closing of a three-year Advocacy Skills Programme.

Photo: Je'nine May

It was a graduation ceremony with a difference. Bertha House Hall in Observatory was filled with celebration and emotion as 13 women living with multiple long-term conditions (MLTCs) donned graduation sashes for the first time.

The event marked the conclusion of a three-year Advocacy Skills Programme hosted by the University of Cape Town's (UCT) [Knowledge Translation Unit \(KTU\)](#). The programme formed part of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)-funded study, *Evidence-led Co-created Health Systems Intervention for MLTC Care*.

Launched in 2022, the academy aims to ensure people living with multiple chronic conditions were heard and actively involved in shaping health interventions. Over three years, participants contributed to designing and overseeing a trial implemented in 32 clinics across the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

"Instead of being passive recipients of care, these women became change-makers," said Professor Lynne Hendricks of Stellenbosch University in her keynote address. "They shaped how clinical tools, patient diaries and community health worker support mechanisms were designed. Their experiences directly informed how health systems can respond more effectively to the reality of living with more than one chronic condition."

One major outcome was the adaptation of clinical decision-support tools used by nurses and doctors to better account for patients with multiple conditions. Participants also co-designed a patient health diary to help people track treatments and understand their conditions.

Building advocates and leaders

The academy was more than a research project; it was also a leadership and skills-building programme. Members completed training in advocacy, public speaking, treatment literacy and leadership, with additional modules tailored to their personal development goals.

"Much of the advocacy landscape in South Africa has focused on single diseases like HIV or TB [tuberculosis]," said Robyn Curran, senior research officer at the KTU. "But many people live with more than one condition at a time – diabetes, hypertension, HIV, asthma, TB and others. The academy equipped these women to advocate not only for themselves but also for millions of others navigating complex health journeys."

For many, the programme offered both healing and empowerment.

Kashiefa Mohammed from Hanover Park joined shortly after her youngest son was killed in a suspected gang-related shooting.

"When I started, I was a broken woman. I just wanted someone to listen to my voice and understand my pain," she said. "When I came to the academy, I realised this was a new community for me. After every workshop, I go back to Hanover Park and engage with stakeholders to show that things should be done differently. This academy has taught me to find myself. Now I know my voice has power, and it can help change how clinics serve people like me."

Pamela Mala, another graduate, spoke about finding courage while facing serious illness. "I contracted TB for the fourth time while on this journey. I was in denial at first, but through the support of my sisters here, I learnt to face my conditions, to name them, and to keep fighting. Today I stand not only as a survivor but as an advocate."

Stories behind the statistics

One of the academy's biggest contributions has been to surface stories that are often invisible in data.

"Numbers alone cannot capture what it means to wake up every day knowing you have to take 10 tablets, walk long distances to the clinic, or miss work for medical appointments," said Professor Hendricks. "Through their voices, we gained a deeper understanding of the human cost – and resilience – behind the statistics."

The programme also created solidarity and connection. "We laughed, we cried, we healed," said Mala. "We carried each other through our losses and celebrated our victories. That is why today is not just an ending. It is a beginning."

Family and friends joined the ceremony, cheering as the graduates crossed the stage. "This moment belongs to you and your families," Hendricks told them. "You invested time and energy to build leadership and advocacy. That is courageous leadership – the kind that changes health systems from the ground up."

Lasting impact

Although the study that housed the academy is ending, its impact continues. The tools co-created with participants are already in use in clinics, while graduates are sharing their advocacy skills in communities and support networks.

"This graduation is not the end," said Curran. "These women will continue to be advocates – in their homes, their clinics and in broader society."

As South Africa faces rising rates of non-communicable diseases alongside TB and HIV, the need for integrated care is urgent. The graduates of the Advocacy Academy are showing what patient-centred health system reform can look like.

"Every health system reform must begin with listening to the people most affected," said Hendricks. "The Advocacy Academy is proof that when you create space for lived experience, you not only gather evidence but also grow leaders. And these leaders will change the future of healthcare."

Story by Myolisi Gophe, UCT News.

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