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11 September 2025

## UCT lecture challenges Africa to make dignity central to universal health access



Dr Tlaleng  
Mofokeng.

hoto: Lerato Maduna

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The University of Cape Town's (UCT) [Faculty of Health Sciences](#)' Pan-African Health Sciences Forum (PAHS) hosted its annual Global Health Lecture on 1 September 2025 under the theme: "*Universal Health Access for Africa: Where are we now?*"

Students, academics and healthcare professionals filled the Wolfson Lecture Theatre to hear keynote speaker Dr Tlaleng Mofokeng, United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on the right to health, deliver a powerful address that set the tone for an evening of critical reflection.

Dr Mofokeng, known globally as “Dr T,” shared her journey of surviving apartheid South Africa, navigating trauma and later becoming a physician and human rights defender. Her message was clear: universal health access cannot be reduced to clinics, hospitals and budgets – it must be grounded in dignity, equity and human rights.

“Health is not just about access to facilities,” she said. “It’s about safe water, nutritious food, healthy workplaces and the ability to live with dignity. We must remember that the right to health is solution oriented. When realised, it enables us to participate in the economy, access education and live fully human lives.”

During her six-year tenure at the UN, Mofokeng advocated for “restoration of dignity” as the foundation of global health systems, drawing lessons from community-led clinics in Brazil to maternal care programmes in India.

### **Power, inequality and systemic barriers**

Mofokeng underscored that healthcare is about power – who holds it, who lacks it, and how this shapes access. She called out discriminatory practices that create barriers to care, from requiring proof of address for contraception to the stigmatisation of sex workers, LGBTQ+ people, migrants and people with disabilities.

“It’s not about vulnerable people, but vulnerable situations created by systems of inequality,” she said. “If we are serious about universal health coverage, we must dismantle these barriers and centre the lived realities of those most affected.”

She criticised administrative “gymnastics” in health systems that complicate care and worsen outcomes, stressing that bureaucracy must never replace compassion.

### **Panel reflections: turning vision into action**

A panel of experts responded to Mofokeng’s lecture, including Professors Susan Cleary, Salome Maswime, Mpiko Ntsekhe, Lydia Cairncross and Edward Kunonga, as well as Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Social Responsiveness and Student Affairs Professor Elelwani Ramugondo.

They discussed South Africa’s National Health Insurance (NHI), balancing public and private care, and the role of community health workers, often the backbone of health services in under-resourced areas. The panel echoed Mofokeng’s call for dignity to guide policy and clinical practice.

### **UCT leadership’s charge**

UCT Vice-Chancellor Professor Mosa Moshabela emphasised the significance of the lecture in shaping UCT’s contribution to African health systems.

“What Dr Mofokeng has reminded us [of] is that health is fundamentally about humanity,” he said. “As a university, our responsibility is not only to pioneer medical technology and research, but also to lead the way in ensuring that innovation translates into equitable access.”

Moshabela described the lecture as a call to action: “We cannot afford to treat universal health access as an abstract goal. It is urgent; it is personal; and it is African.”

### **Lessons from the frontlines**

Mofokeng illustrated her points with frontline experiences, from South African community health workers identifying school dropouts to mothers struggling to conceal pregnancies. She highlighted the paradox of world-class institutions coexisting with stark inequality.

"UCT is one of the biggest pockets of excellence globally, period," she said. "Yet within South Africa, we have deep-seated inequality. Our challenge is to ensure that excellence does not coexist with exclusion."

She urged healthcare professionals to see themselves as defenders of dignity and human rights, warning against a culture that "breaks" young doctors. "If we accept our role as defenders of dignity and rights, we can lead the paradigm shift towards equity," she said.

### **Universal access as solidarity**

Looking ahead, Mofokeng stressed that universal health coverage must be rooted in solidarity, not dependency.

"True solidarity is unconditional," she said. "It is not about what other countries did for us 30 years ago. It is about recognising our shared humanity and shared destiny, and acting accordingly."

She cautioned African nations against relying on donors, urging countries to strengthen domestic financing and resource allocation for health.

### **Closing reflections**

The lecture concluded with remarks from Professor Graham Fieggen, director of the [Neuroscience Institute](#), and Professor Digby Warner, director of the [Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine](#). Both stressed the importance of connecting high-level policy with ground-level realities to achieve health equity.

The Global Health Lecture has become a flagship PAHS event, providing a platform for UCT to convene leading voices to confront Africa's pressing health challenges. This year's message was clear: dignity is not optional in pursuing universal health access – it is the foundation.

*Story by Lyndon Julius, UCT News.*

**Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department**

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