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New UCT/NICD unit will track and study hospital-acquired infections

Hospital-acquired infections will be one of the focus areas of the Unit for Molecular Epidemiology in National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) laboratories at Groote Schuur Hospital. The unit is a joint venture between the University of Cape Town and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) of the NHLS. It will be jointly headed by UCT professors Mark Nicol and Anna-Lise Williamson.

In 2007 The South African Human Rights Commission released a report on public health facilities in the country, citing general poor infection control measures as one of the failures of public healthcare. Hospital-acquired infection has been identified as a reason for the death of babies in facilities such as the Charlotte Maxeke Hospital in Johannesburg, where six babies recently died, and Natalspruit Hospital in Katshele, east of Johannesburg, where 11 babies died.

Speaking at a mini-symposium preceding the launch of the unit on 25 May 2010, Professor Nicol, of the Division of Medical Microbiology, and Professor Williamson, of the Division of Medical Virology, said investigations of outbreaks of hospital-acquired infections would focus on the coastal regions of South Africa.

"We are very excited to have the first NICD unit outside of Johannesburg," said Williamson. "The unit will create a better understanding of the molecular epidemiology of infectious disease in the Eastern and Western Cape.

"Hospital-acquired infections are a problem worldwide, and they need to be monitored in all hospitals to ensure that infection control is being implemented effectively. We will start with infections in our region, and once the unit is operating successfully we will continue expanding the studies to other regions."

In collaboration with the NICD in Johannesburg, the unit will also work to improve understanding of the local epidemiology of multi-resistant bacterial pathogens. As part of a national collaborative network, the unit will also identify and track emerging pathogens in the coastal region, and manage the African activities of the

World Health Organisation's HPV Labnet, which provides laboratory services to monitor the impact of vaccination against the human papillomavirus.

Dr Andrew Whitelaw of UCT's Division of Medical Microbiology said good hand hygiene is paramount in hospitals. Medical staff tend to clean their hands only after touching a patient and not before, which could result in infections and the spread of viruses.

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