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UCT's newest A-rated researcher looks to plants, insects for major vaccines

Professor Ed Rybicki of the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology is the University of Cape Town's newest A-rated researcher, following the release of the latest ratings by the National Research Foundation (NRF).

UCT Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Danie Visser said: "Professor Rybicki has made a huge contribution to research in the amazing notion of using plants as production systems for vaccine antigens, and he has established one of the best labs in the world for this purpose."

Professor Rybicki is UCT's top inventor, with 44 patents. His research activities are presently centred on the use of plants and insect baculoviruses to express proteins of pharmaceutical interest, and especially potential vaccines. In both cases, genes of different organisms are combined to create an expression system. These are then used to make candidate vaccines (vaccines that have been tested in the laboratory, but not yet in humans or target animals) against diseases such as the Human papillomavirus, HIV-1 subtype C (the dominant strain in Southern Africa), the beak and feather disease virus of parrots, and the H5N1 and H1N1 influenza viruses. A continuing area of interest is the engineering of transgenic resistance in plants to plant viruses, and in plant and human virus diversity.

Professor Rybicki's credentials include his 30-year career in plant virology and plant biotechnology. Since 1997 he has also worked in the field of vaccines.

Professor Rybicki's rating brings UCT's tally of A-rated researchers to 31. According to the NRF website, A-ratings are awarded to "researchers who are unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field". P-rated researchers are young researchers (normally younger than age 35) "who, on the basis of exceptional potential demonstrated in their published doctoral work and/or their early post-doctoral careers, are considered likely to become future international leaders in their field".

Dr David Braun of the Department of Archaeology and Dr Amanda Weltman of the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics at UCT were given P-ratings, or President's Awards, by the NRF. Professor George Ekama of the Department of Civil

Engineering and Professor Hans-Peter Kunzi of the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics at UCT have retained their A-ratings.

“Each of these researchers is making a difference on a global scale in very different fields,” said Professor Visser. “They collectively symbolise the depth and rich variety of UCT’s research.”

Attached photo: Professor Ed Rybicki of the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of Cape Town. (Please credit UCT.)

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