

NEWS FROM:



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UCT introduces “fast-track” degree programme to build skills in clinical health research

Journalists are invited to workshop on 15 July 2011, 08h45-16h00, Twelve Apostles Hotel, Oudekraal, Camps Bay. RSVP for catering purposes to Dr Merle Futter: Tel 021 406-6425 or email merle.futter@uct.ac.za

The Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town, in partnership with other universities in South Africa, Nigeria and Malawi, has introduced a “fast-track” degree programme to allow medical students to work simultaneously towards a Master’s degree or PhD in clinical research, as a way of addressing the critical shortage of academic clinicians in Africa.

On Friday, 15 July 2011, the Faculty of Health Sciences will host a workshop to discuss the new degree programme, the skills shortage in clinical health research and the need to proactively groom future leaders in this field. Participants will include Professor Bongani Mayosi, the Head of the Department of Medicine at UCT; Professor Adesola Oggunniyi of University College Hospital in Ibadan, Nigeria; deans of the eight medical schools in South Africa; and representatives of the Medical Research Council, Discovery Foundation, the Academy of Science for South Africa, the Centre for Research on Science and Technology in the USA, the Physicians Partnership Trust, among others.

Journalists may attend all or part of the workshop and participate in the discussions and workshops.

Background: new generation of clinicians desperately needed

Professor Mayosi said: "The academic clinical research workforce is ageing and has been steadily declining in numbers since the early 1990s." The combined burden of clinical teaching and training, health service, and research thus falls on a shrinking pool of largely male, white, older academics in health science faculties. This means there is limited capacity to build up a new generation of properly trained healthcare workers and clinical researchers. This at a time when infectious disease such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS as well as incidences of heart disease and stroke are on the rise, increasing the demands on clinical services. "In some disciplines, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech-language therapy and audiology, academic research is relatively new and like the medical disciplines, these fields require a relevant knowledge to shape a practice for the South African context," said Professor Mayosi.

UCT has introduced a new "fast-track" programme in which medical students work towards an intercalated degree: they follow the MBChB curriculum for three years, then take a year off to do Honours study in clinical research before returning to the MBChB programme. They may begin working on a Masters degree or PhD while doing clinical work, subject to Senate approval. Concurrent registration puts high demands on the student, so the programme focuses only on the top performers in the MBChB programme. Six medical students from UCT started the intercalated programme at the beginning of 2011. The coursework Masters for Clinical Research component for associated health sciences is being developed for the first intake of students in 2013.

Professor Mayosi said: "To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive programme to address the development of academic leaders through research in South Africa. There is clear evidence from the United Kingdom and the United States that research training that is integrated with professional training, and that is targeted at the top 5% to 10% of the class, has the greatest chance of producing committed and effective academic clinicians."

A similar programme is in the planning stages for allied health science postgraduates in nursing, occupational therapy, speech therapy, physiotherapy and nutrition and dietetics. Immediately after completion of their basic degree, these students will continue with their coursework Masters and PhD. Professor Mayosi said: "These programmes will be targeted at the most able, most talented, and most motivated students with potential to become leaders in their field. Therefore, these programmes will essentially focus on the top 5% to 10% of students in each graduating class. The aim will be to produce at least 100 PhD trained clinician scientists over the next 10 years at UCT."

The programme will draw students not only from UCT, but also from historically black institutions in South Africa, such as the University of Limpopo and Walter Sisulu University, and other institutions in Africa such as the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and the Kigali Health Institute in Rwanda.

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