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Prestigious award for UCT's champion of drug discovery

University of Cape Town professor Kelly Chibale was presented the 2011 Alan Pifer Research Award on 15 March 2012, in recognition of his establishment of the H3-D Drug Discovery and Development Centre - the first centre of its kind in Africa, which runs under Professor Chibale's direction.

The annual award honours a UCT researcher whose outreach work has contributed to the advancement and welfare of South Africa's disadvantaged people. The award further highlights UCT's strategic goal of promoting socially responsive research. Professor Chibale has been honoured in recognition of the impressive impact that his research has achieved, particularly in the field of drug discovery against diseases that affect Africans.

In addition to contributing to the advancement and welfare of the disadvantaged, Professor Chibale's research – on potential drugs for diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis – shows that science is not just an abstract discipline, as some may believe, but is very relevant to solving some very human problems. Professor Chibale's research is proof that, with the right support and infrastructure, researchers in Africa are more than a match for their peers in the rest of the world.

The award is offered annually to one or more top researchers at UCT who are engaged in medical, economic, scientific, engineering and social research which has demonstrated relevance to the advancement and welfare of South Africa's disadvantaged people. Kelly Chibale's achievements over the past several years qualify him as a strong candidate for this award.

Professor Chibale said: "With our new, unique model of drug discovery, we've shown that good science can be produced in Africa. Through this project, we are creating opportunities and jobs for people from the UK and the US to come and work here."

H3-D, in partnership with the Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV) based in Geneva, Switzerland, and the South African Technology Innovation Agency (TIA), has discovered an exciting new class of antimalarials (medicinal drugs used to prevent or treat malaria). H3-D has been working with MMV since 2009 on this research, specifically in search of new molecules with the potential to become next-generation antimalarials.

Chibale added: "The MMV/UCT project has single-handedly built infrastructure, technology platforms and expertise. Thanks to MMV, all these resources and lessons learnt through our quest to solve malaria are rapidly being applied within H3-D to other diseases in South Africa, such as tuberculosis and cardiovascular disease."

In 2011, Professor Chibale was awarded the TW Kambule National Research Foundation (NRF) award, in recognition for his significant contribution to research capacity and skills development in several key areas critical to the discovery of modern pharmaceutical medicines.

Dr Alan Pifer, in whose name the UCT award was established, was the president of the Carnegie Corporation and the founding chair of the UCT Fund. He died in 2005. The Alan Pifer Award was established by the UCT Fund in 1992 with an endowed gift from American scientists Dr Caryl Haskins and his wife, Dr Edna Haskins. There are 18 previous recipients of the award; the most recent was Professor Susan Parnell in 2010, for her work in urban poverty reduction and environmental management.

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