

Award to fund paediatric heart disease research in Africa

"There is a great need to focus on children with heart disease in Africa, an undeserved area of need," says Liesl. Zühlke, paediatric cardiologist associate professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT) after winning the prestigious SA Medical Research Council/ UK Department of International Development(MRC/DFID) African Research Leader Award.



Associate Professor Liesl Zühlke. Photo: UCT

The award, valued at £750,000 (R14.565m) over five years, will assist her in continuing her research of children with heart disease in Africa, in partnership with local and international colleagues.

It will build on the current work being done by Zühlke and will tackle three unmet needs in children with heart disease. The first is rheumatic heart disease (RHD), where children develop sore throats caused by a bacterial infection with an organism called group A streptococcus (GAS). A third of sore throats in children is caused by GAS, and children living in conditions of poverty, overcrowding and repeated infection, are particularly vulnerable due to weakened immune systems. The next area of focus is those children born with heart problems, congenital heart disease (CHD). The third area of focus will be cardiac diseases (CD) associated with HIV/ART. HIV can affect many different aspects of cardiovascular health including causing weakness of the heart muscle and heart failure.

"We will examine specific scientific questions relating to healthcare delivery and how diseases occur, which are directed towards providing better care for children with heart disease in Africa. We plan to work on three heart diseases causing major health problems in millions of children and young adults in Africa and other parts of the developing world," Zühlke says.

All these studies will have several sample groups in each of the research areas. The results achieved by Zühlke and her team will be linked to capacity building in five other African countries (Namibia, Malawi, Egypt, Zambia and Ghana) and will attempt to provide new datasets, novel genetic explorations and facilitate post-graduate studies in all six (including our own) countries.

The key areas of impact include the advancement in scientific and health knowledge; development of clinical, imaging and laboratory expertise in Africa; addressing the contribution of RHD, CHD and HIV associated heart disease to adverse outcomes in children and young people's health; delivering highly skilled people to the labour market in participating countries; engaging the public on the value of prompt diagnosis and treatment in GAS infection and facilitating their uptake of services; conducting patient and family-informed and accountable research ;consolidating international and continental networks; and direct improved patient benefit in a transitional country.

Source: UCT Faculty of Health Sciences

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