

More cash for varsity research

Scientists tackling South Africa's biggest diseases have received a multimillion-rand boost thanks to the Medical Research Council and the Treasury.

"University professors were complaining that they couldn't do the research they needed to do," said council head Professor Salim Abdool Karim.

"This money is for the revitalisation of medical research. We want our universities to be the best in the world."

The professor, a world leader in HIV research, applied to National Treasury for an economic competitiveness grant and beat a number of government departments. The council will receive a three-year grant of over R350-million.

But the process has not been without conflict.

Karim took over the leadership of the council last year and shut down some research units, which led to an outcry.

In August last year, he defended the closing of units and the resultant retrenchments. He said the council's annual budget of R400-million could not sustain the 23 units.

Karim said: "We cut research that took 45% of our budget but contributed to 9% of productivity. We were then able to convince Treasury to give us more money."

HIV and TB research is to become more central to the council's agenda.

Of the funds secured, R150-million will go to university research over three years and R200-million to five projects at the Medical Research Council.

Twelve university projects have been identified, including a University of Limpopo study to find new treatment for drug-resistant tuberculosis and a University of Pretoria investigation into the use of stem cells in finding a cure for HIV.

Other research studies that are funded investigate rape, alcohol abuse, mental health disorders and cardiovascular disease.

Dr Niresh Bhagwandin, executive manager of strategic research initiatives at the council, said: "The applications for funding were subject to a rigorous peer review process. Each required a minimum of two international reviewers with expertise in the particular field of research."

Source: The Times

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