

UCT student receives L'Oréal-Unesco doctoral fellowship

At the L'Oréal-Unesco For Women in Science programme ceremony held in Nairobi, Kenya last night, 6 December 2018, University of Cape Town (UCT) PhD candidate Lerato Hlaka received one of only 12 PhD fellowships given to young female scientists from across Africa this year.



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Hlaka's research, in the Department of Pathology, Division of Immunology, involves identifying potential drug-targets for pathogen and host-directed therapy for tuberculosis. The work that was honoured last night is in collaboration with Professor Colin Suckling and Dr Katherine Carter from the University of Strathclyde and Dr Fraser Scott from the University of Huddersfield. It involves identifying the anti-mycobacterial activity of minor groove binder compounds as a foundation for the development of a novel inhalable drug formulation for the treatment of tuberculosis.

This could potentially lead to the development of an effective anti-TB formulation, a much-needed intervention in a country with one of the highest burdens of TB globally.

“The high incidences of drug-resistant tuberculosis propel an urgent need for the development of new effective drugs. Understanding the different levels of host-pathogen interactions may lead to identification of potential drug targets that may result in the development of novel shortened effective drug regimen for TB therapy. I am grateful to my supervisors, Associate Professor Reto Guler, Professor Frank Brombacher and Dr Mumin Ozturk, and our collaborator Dr Fraser Scott for providing me the opportunity to be part of this work,” said Hlaka.

With a Bachelor of Science Honours in Biological Sciences (Cell Biology) and a master's degree in Biological Sciences (Parasitology) from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Hlaka has already published seven research papers, two of which are on the awarded subject. This is also not the first recognition for her – to mention a few, in 2017 she was named as one of the Mail and Guardian's Top 200 Young South Africans. Also in 2017, her first co-authored publication (Hlaka et al., 2017, Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy) received second prize in the Institute of Infectious Diseases and Molecular Medicine (IDM) postgraduate students' publication awards.

Recently she received the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Health travel award to attend the 2018 Keystone symposium on 21st Century Drug Discovery and Development for Global Health, which provided her an opportunity to attend a joint plenary session with the 2018 Global Grand Challenges meeting in Berlin, Germany.

Women are still under-represented in science, and make up barely 28% of researchers. The L'Oréal-Unesco For Women in Science programme has recognised outstanding female scientists for the last 20 years. The purpose is to support and recognise accomplished women researchers, to encourage more young women to enter the profession and to assist them once their careers are in progress.

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