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| **19 March 2014****Psycho-social support crucial for caregivers in AIDS-affected communities, says first-of-a-kind UCT study** Psycho-social support should be a key element of mental health interventions for caregivers of children in HIV-endemic communities. This is the recommendation of University of Cape Town researcher, Dr Marisa Casale, in her doctoral study titled: *The protective role of social support for the health of caregivers of children in HIV-endemic South Africa*.The study, which investigates the relationship between social support and the health of caregivers in HIV-endemic communities, is the first of its kind in Southern Africa.Dr Casale, who has been a researcher at the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s (UKZN) Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD) for the last nine years, has found that caregivers who receive more emotional and tangible support from their friends, family and communities, are less likely to experience anxiety and depression.As part of a larger, mixed-method study co-funded by HEARD at UKZN, Dr Casale surveyed 2,477 adult caregivers of children (between the ages of 10 and 17) at a rural and an urban site in KwaZulu-Natal. She wanted to establish the relationship between social support and caregiver health. Another aspect which affects the mental health of these caregivers is the fact that they are in some cases also HIV positive or living with other chronic illnesses. The survey results showed that caregivers living with HIV were about four times more likely to experience mental health problems than healthy caregivers, while others in the group with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and hypertension, were twice as likely to experience anxiety and depression. As part of the study Dr Casale also interviewed 24 male and female caregivers – half of whom were HIV positive – to find out how they thought social support influenced their mental health. Dr Casale explains: “Social support can prevent mental health problems by providing caregivers with an opportunity to communicate problems and receive advice; by boosting self-esteem, confidence and hope; and by encouraging caregivers to tackle problems more directly. It prevents rumination, in other words the repetitive and negative thoughts about the causes of their (the caregivers’) illness and their imminent death, which has been shown to lead to more depression.”Before her doctoral studies at UCT, Dr Casale obtained a degree in economics and banking science from the University of Siena in Italy, and worked as a credit analyst and micro-finance lecturer. She decided to exchange the world of finance for the world of social science, because she realised how important it was to understand what motivates and explains people’s behaviour and decision making, and she developed a growing interest in this field. “I believe that being able to link the economics and systems questions with the social science behavioural questions is particularly important in the current southern African context, where health service uptake and health equity remain key challenges.”Dr Casale’s doctoral study was part of a larger project which saw 6,000 children and 2,500 adult carers being interviewed across six urban and rural sites in three South African provinces, to identify the needs of AIDS-affected families. This project, called the Young Carers SA project, is a collaboration between South African government departments, NGOs and universities such as UKZN, UCT, the University of Oxford (UK) and Brown University (USA). ***ENDS******Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department*****Mologadi Makwela** Communication and Marketing DepartmentUniversity of Cape TownTel: (021) 650 5427 Fax: (021) 650 5628Cell:  (078) 258 3965E-mail: loga.makwela@uct.ac.za   Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)  Follow us on Twitter: @UCT\_news |