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Top UCT researchers scoop SAMRC scientific awards

Outstanding contributions to health research and a dedication to addressing public health challenges have earned four University of Cape Town (UCT) researchers prestigious recognition from the [South African Medical Research Council](#) (SAMRC).

The recent SAMRC scientific merit awards acknowledge noteworthy contributions of the best scientists in South Africa, especially in health sciences. To qualify, their work must reflect exceptional scientific acumen – particularly if dedication is shown to addressing public health challenges in ways that over time have significantly improved the lives of South Africans.

Platinum Lifetime Achievement awardees

This honour is intended for exceptional scientists who have raised the country's science profile and contributed to building the foundations for health research in South Africa for future generations.

Pioneering professors Estelle (Vicki) Lambert of the [UCT Research Centre for Health through Physical Activity, Lifestyle and Sport \(HPALS\)](#) and Frank Brombacher of the [Wellcome Centre for Infectious Diseases Research in Africa](#) were each recognised with the Platinum award.

Professor Lambert is internationally recognised for advocating for population-based strategies aimed at increasing safe and equitable opportunities to participate in physical activity and have access to healthy and affordable food. She is also known for encouraging engaged scholarship through citizen science.

For Lambert, the award is about more than just her role as a researcher; it is also recognition of the work of a large community of Global South researchers focused on physical activity, food security and health equity.

"We do not lack research capacity in this area in our region, but we do lack prioritisation and adequate funding by governments and other agencies. The benefits of promoting physical activity reach well beyond the health sector and speak directly to at least 13 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and planetary health," said Lambert.

An NRF A-rated researcher, Professor Brombacher is the scientific coordinator for Immunology and Infectious Diseases for the Cape Town chapter of the [International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology \(ICGEB\)](#). His group's key research is on

understanding host protective immune responses in human diseases. He is also a full member of the [Institute of Infectious Diseases and Molecular Medicine \(IDM\)](#).

Silver Medal awardees

Silver medals are conferred on accomplished scientists who have made significant contributions in their fields within 10 years of having been awarded their PhD or Master of Medicine degree. This year, professors Nicola Mulder, who heads up the Computational Biology Division, and Wendy Burgers, from the Division of Medical Virology – both full members of the IDM – were honoured with Silver Medals.

Professor Mulder also leads [H3ABioNet](#), a pan-African bioinformatics network of 28 institutions in 17 countries. The network is developing bioinformatics capacity to enable genomic data analysis through an extensive training programme for African researchers. Mulder said her recognition is a nod to all the African scientists who've been empowered by the capacity-building work of this network.

"I am honoured to receive this award among so many esteemed scientists. In addition to using data to uncover the rich genetic diversity of African populations and [its] potential impact on health, my group develops tools and resources that facilitate improved research on African data, and we build human capacity to do so. It is important to us that African scientists are empowered to analyse their own genomic data by having the right skills and resources to enable this," said Mulder.

Professor Burgers is a viral immunologist studying the human immune response to infections. She established and is the director of the Cellular Immunology Platform at UCT, a clinical immunology research hub for vaccine evaluation and capacity building, for new and existing pathogens and future epidemics and pandemics.

"I am not a fan of individual awards, because science is done as a team. I honour my incredible colleague and scientific partner, Dr Catherine Riou, who is equally deserving of this award. I thank and honour every member of my team, all of whom demonstrated exceptional commitment and dedication – from conducting high-quality research to maintaining the lab's operations, even in the most challenging of pandemic circumstances," concluded Burgers.

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