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## **‘Losing a child to cancer a cardinal sin’ – UCT professor highlights collaboration in childhood cancer fight**



Prof Alan Davidson

Photo: Lerato Maduna

In his recent inaugural lecture, the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Professor Alan Davidson shared six principles that reflect what has made his collaborative work in paediatrics rewarding. The lecture focused on the topic *"It Takes a Team: Advancing Paediatric Oncology Through Collaborative Care"*.

Drawing on decades of work in research, clinical care and teaching, Professor Davidson offered valuable insights into developing oncology services in middle-income countries and

spearheading international initiatives focused on mission-driven care. He serves as the head of the Paediatric Haematology-Oncology Services at the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital and UCT.

To illustrate the theme of collaborative care, Davidson provided several suggestions: know your history, be curious, never stop learning, the team is everything, grow leadership and know that advocacy is everybody's job. "Understanding how the history of our various specialities has been shaped is crucial for a specialist or sub-specialist. Although the evidence base is a prerequisite, the institutions and individuals provide colour and make it all memorable to a specialist trainee," he said.

Davidson mentioned that he cut his teeth auditing the research work they were doing under great supervision. "I enjoyed getting to grips with patient stories often before I'd ever met them. As I started to get more involved in global affairs, I found myself co-chairing the international society's adapted therapy working group [and] the Malawi team I was working with had shown how dangerous off the shelf global north protocols could be in the low-and-middle income country setting. To lose a child to cancer is tragic. To lose more than a handful of children to toxicity is the cardinal sin," he explained.

According to him, the results of their efforts were "improvements in outcomes and management practises based partly on better understanding of disease as well as therapeutic innovations but resting fundamentally on a commitment to multidisciplinary."

The African Paediatric Fellowship programme embodies the idea of continuous learning. It is a programme "that is a great source of pride for our department. It has given us a massive footprint across the region. In turn, we have learned a great deal; collaborations have brought funding and opportunities ... we work with everybody, we belong to no one."

"We have developed a tightly knit team. We get the basics right and we celebrate success. Every trainee comes in and goes out with a simple metric – what and how will you decide when it's up to you and how will you manage and develop future trainees?"

Davidson stated that advocacy involves supporting health coverage, improving the quality of specialist services, and collaborating on medicine and technology. "The work of the Policy and Economics Research in Childhood Cancer (PERCC) at Sick Kids has been seminal. Prolonged survival with good quality of life using conventional therapies is possible and affordable," he said.

He concluded his lecture by addressing the question of money, saying: "As a community, we have very adequately made the case for treating childhood cancer in general terms and we see a future working with clinical oncologists ... advocacy is the only way forward around pricing and extended access. And we can fight for these things as long as there is justice. So, I leave you with the moral dilemma of the age: who gets what?"

*Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News*

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