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UCT academic joins calls for Africa-led health research and development

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Professor Jo-Ann Passmore is among 14 Celestous Juma Science Leadership Fellows from across the continent who have authored a commentary [paper](#) that outlines practical, Africa-led actions to strengthen health research and development (R&D) ecosystems in the context of rapidly shifting global health funding.

Published in the *Nature Health* journal, the [commentary](#) moves beyond problem description to propose concrete, delivery-focused solutions across six priority areas, including product development, financing, human capital, health data systems, supply chains and research culture. The paper is titled "Six ways to empower African research and development for health".

Passmore is currently head of the Mucosal Immunology Group at the [Division of Medical Virology](#) at UCT's [Department of Pathology](#). Her membership and involvement in the work of this noble group is of particular significance given UCT's leadership in African health research, innovation and policy-relevant scholarship.

"Strengthening pathways that translate African research into locally produced health innovations is critical for impact," said Passmore, who is also principal medical scientist at the National Health Laboratory Services.

Scientific leaders from Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe are advancing practical Africa-led solutions to strengthen R&D for health amid profound disruptions in global health funding that threaten access to healthcare across Africa. While national and regional policies have sought to address long-standing barriers within Africa's R&D ecosystem, many challenges persist, particularly at the operational level.

The paper argues that "the challenges we face as Africans in the current rapidly changing international funding environment underscore the importance of engaging in relevant actions to collectively shape a bright future for African R&D."

Professor Nicki Tiffin, lead author of the commentary and deputy director of the South African National Bioinformatics Institute at the University of the Western Cape, noted that

while many of the barriers facing health researchers were complex, many were operational and solvable through context-specific interventions aligned to local needs and realities.

To lower systemic barriers to research and development in Africa, the Fellows call for urgent action across six priority areas:

- Product development: Build a sustainable, private sector-led R&D ecosystem that accelerates innovation and commercialisation through collaboration, policy and capital
- Financial ecosystems: Create a diversified and sustainable R&D financing ecosystem with domestic public, private and philanthropic investment
- Human capital: Develop a robust, diverse R&D workforce supported by clear career pathways and expanded access to STEM education
- Health data ecosystems: Establish strong health data infrastructure and digital-enabling environments, alongside support for digital skills development
- Supply chain and logistics: Foster efficient and resilient R&D supply chains that ensure timely access to quality inputs and support local production
- Research culture, equity and excellence: Promote an inclusive research culture grounded in mentorship, collaboration, ethical practice and excellence

The Fellows' call aligns with a growing movement across the scientific community demanding delivery-focused, locally grounded reform. Recent discourse challenging performative change in favour of solutions that work reflects a strong appetite for action over rhetoric.

"This is not a wish list," said Professor Tom Kariuki, chief executive officer of the Science for Africa Foundation, which supports the Fellowship's communications. "It is an invitation to act together, using approaches that are already within reach. Africa's health challenges are urgent, but so are the solutions."

About the Calestous Juma Science Leadership Fellowship

Launched in 2021, the Gates Foundation-funded fellowship supports African researchers to advance scientific leadership while working collaboratively to strengthen research and innovation ecosystems across the continent.

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