

## NEWS FROM:

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Communication and Marketing Department  
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso  
Kommunikasie en Bemakingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa  
La Grotto House, Glendarrach Rd, Rondebosch, Cape Town  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650-3733/2, Fax: +27 (0) 21 650-5682  
Internet: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)

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## **UCT honours pesticide researcher**

**2010 Distinguished Social Responsiveness Award goes to Dr Hanna-Andrea Rother for her work on effect of street pesticides on children's health**

Dr Hanna-Andrea Rother's work on the harmful effects of street pesticides on children's health and health policy has earned her the University of Cape Town's 2010 Distinguished Social Responsiveness Award.

Established by Vice-Chancellor Dr Max Price to promote the university's commitment to social responsiveness as an important institutional activity, the award is valued at R25 000. It is open to staff whose activities benefit not only UCT, but also an external community.

Dr Rother's pioneering work in this area of public health has already influenced state policy. Armed with her research, Dr Rother has challenged government and industry with possible solutions to the use of illegal and highly toxic pesticides among the urban poor in Cape Town's peri-urban communities.

Dr Rother is the programme leader of Health Risk Management in the Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health Research. She brought to light the extensive use of agricultural pesticides, which are too toxic for household consumption, to tackle poverty-related pest infestations.

Not only did she uncover highly toxic occupational exposures for the informal vendors of these street pesticides, but she linked the poisoning of children to the accidental ingestion of these products. This is because street pesticides are sold in the kinds of bottles that had previously been used for water, fruit juice and alcohol.

Dr Rother's project worked closely with a community NGO, which co-initiated the project and participated in the research design. A Child Pesticide Policy reference group

representing the community, child health practitioners, researchers and government was established to discuss the research process, findings, problems and interventions.

Dr Rother's initiative resulted in communication tools to spread the knowledge about this risk. The team developed a chart that helps clinicians, nurses, health promoters and environmental health professionals to identify and treat poisoning by street pesticides. This chart has been distributed nationally.

Other communication tools, such as stickers that tell about the hazards of street pesticides, have been produced for national and international distribution. A pamphlet in three languages raises awareness of pesticide hazards for children. A wall chart on the prevention of child pesticide poisoning was inserted into a local newspaper.

A new notification form to improve the system for pesticide poisoning has been implemented by the National Department of Health, and presentations have been organised by the Departments of Health and Environmental Affairs and Tourism.

Dr Rother's programme also focuses on equipping under-resourced African officials to reduce the risks from pesticide use, particularly for vulnerable populations. The programme includes bi-monthly online seminars on UCT's in-house Vula website, and a new post-graduate course in pesticide risk management, involving pesticide regulators from most African countries and resource persons from several United Nations organisations

Undergraduate, honours and master's students in UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences and the Department of Anthropology conduct community-based household surveys, collect narratives from families of poisoned children, participate in field observations, interview informal sellers of pesticides, work alongside community fieldworkers and design risk communication tools.

Dr Rother plans to use her award to further her social responsiveness initiative.

Caption for attached photo: Dr Hanna-Andrea Rother is the 2010 recipient of the UCT Distinguished Social Responsiveness Award for her work on the sale and use of illegal and highly toxic pesticides among Cape Town's poor communities.

***ENDS***

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**Patricia Lucas**

Tel: (021) 650 5428/5427/5672 Fax (021) 650 5628

**Cell: 076 292 8047**

E-mail: [loga.makwela@uct.ac.za](mailto:loga.makwela@uct.ac.za)

La Grotto House, Glendarrach Road

University of Cape Town

Rondebosch

Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)