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UCT research on managing pain in HIV/AIDS sufferers is global first

University of Cape Town researcher Dr Romy Parker is the first person in the world to conduct research that explores methods to manage pain in people living with HIV using a non-pharmacological approach.

"South Africa has the largest HIV positive population in the world," says Dr Parker. "Although we are managing the disease with antiretroviral drugs – which have decreased the number of deaths – this has not fully restored the quality of life in those living with HIV/AIDS."

Her thesis titled *Pain in HIV/AIDS: Characteristics, contributing factors and the effects of a six-week peer-led exercise and education intervention*, examines the prevalence and characteristics of pain in people living with HIV/AIDS. Using a systematic review and a quantitative clinical study, Parker establishes that pain is a significant problem in people living with HIV/AIDS.

She further determines that only 1% of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) receive adequate pharmacological management of their pain. Parker said: "Even with treatment, pain remains one of the most common symptoms in PLWHA. Living with pain not only decreases the quality of life but also has an impact on a person's ability to function, concentrate, learn and/or participate in society (both as a member of a family and as a worker)."

Her work included developing and testing a novel intervention programme using exercise and education to manage pain in Xhosa women living with HIV/AIDS and experiencing pain. The intervention was found to significantly reduce pain severity and pain interference in this population. Results further support the premise that pain in people living with HIV/AIDS is biopsychosocial in nature and responds to exercise and education interventions.

"The intervention appears to be a culturally acceptable, effective treatment which can

be rolled out in low-resource primary healthcare settings with the potential to have a wide impact in South Africa," says Parker. The next step is to test it in different communities across South Africa.

Parker is a senior lecturer at UCT's Department of Health and Rehabilitation. She holds a BSc(Physio) and BSc(Med)(Hons) in Exercise Science (Physiology) from UCT. She obtained her MSc (Pain) from Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh. Parker received her PhD in Psychiatry at the UCT graduation ceremony on 6 June 2013.

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