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## **Link between trauma exposure, chronic conditions and mental disorders - UCT PhD study**

A recent study by a University of Cape Town doctoral graduate has demonstrated a clear link between trauma exposure, chronic physical conditions and other mental disorders - the first time that a scientific study has established this link. These findings could be useful in designing interventions aimed at reducing the burden of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), chronic physical conditions and other mental disorders.

Using the data collected in the South African Stress and Health Study (SASH), Associate Professor Lukoye Atwoli found that there is an association between trauma exposure and chronic physical conditions such as arthritis, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and chronic pain. He also found a link between trauma exposure and other mental disorders, like mood and anxiety disorder. Trauma exposure also increased the risk of chronic physical conditions such as chronic pain, cardiovascular and respiratory disease and arthritis.

"My research provides information on an important social issue, and for the first time demonstrates a link between trauma exposure and physical health in an African context," said Associate Professor Atwoli, who is also Dean of School of Medicine at Moi University in Kenya. "Going forward, clinicians and other responders to traumatic events will have to take measures to establish baseline physical health, and also take measures to mitigate the risk of occurrence of both mental and physical post traumatic disorders."

According to the study findings, the commonest traumatic events were related to the unexpected death of a loved one and witnessing a traumatic event occurring to someone else. Based on these findings, Associate Professor Atwoli, recommended that interventions for trauma survivors must not only address those directly involved but also those that witnessed traumatic events.

“I hope that my findings will be used in designing interventions for trauma survivors, and for advocacy in addressing the huge burden of trauma exposure not only in South Africa but in most the low and middle-income countries across the globe,” he said.

Associate Professor Atwoli also generated the first estimates of PTSD risk associated with different trauma type.

“I have always been interested in trauma and PTSD research, and my Master of Medicine (MMed) thesis at the University of Nairobi involved assessment of PTSD among survivors of the Mau Mau concentration camps in Kenya, about 50 years after incarceration,” he said.

Associate Professor Atwoli’s doctoral thesis was supervised by award-winning psychiatry professor Dan Stein, whose research focuses on psychiatric disorders, in particular, looking at anxiety and related disorders. Professor Stein, who heads the Department of Psychiatry & Mental Health at the University of Cape Town, was recently awarded the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) Award for research and output.

“UCT is without doubt the best university in Africa, and punches above its weight internationally, and I jumped at the opportunity to pursue a PhD here,” said Associate Professor Atwoli. “The availability of resources, including online forums, made my load that much lighter, and I would not hesitate to recommend UCT to anyone interested in PhD studies.”

**END**

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