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World's first centre to tackle fungal infection-related deaths opens today at UCT

- **Over a million deaths linked to fungal infections worldwide every year**
- **R10-million centre set up by University of Aberdeen in collaboration with UCT**
- **Most fungal infection deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa**

The world's first international research centre for tackling fungal infections – which kill around 1.3 million people globally every year – is officially opening at 15:00 today, 11 August 2017, at Wolfson Pavilion, Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine (IDM) at UCT. The establishment of the centre is a collaboration between UCT and the University of Aberdeen (UA).

The majority of global deaths related to fungal infections happen in Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. In this part of the world, fungal infections contribute to between 600,000 to one million deaths – more than malaria and around the same number of deaths as tuberculosis.

In sub-Saharan Africa, around 50% of people die as a result of invasive fungal infections. In 2008, for instance, a million cases of cryptococcal meningitis were reported in patients with HIV/AIDS, resulting in more than 500,000 related deaths.

Now the UA internationally recognised Aberdeen Fungal Group (AFG) in collaboration with UCT have established the world's first research centre focused on tackling these diseases in Africa. The R10-million (£600,000) UA's AFGrica Unit will be based at UCT's IDM, headed by Professor Valerie Mizrahi.

The new unit will give the AFG experts a centre of operations in Africa, where they can work in collaboration with UCT experts to establish research programmes that can target priority areas in fungal diseases relevant to the continent.

The development supports the ongoing objectives and activities of the prestigious Medical Research Council Centre for Medical Mycology, set up at the UA in February 2016. It also

builds on an existing Wellcome Trust funded Strategic Award led by the AFG, where PhD students from low and middle-income nations (including Africa) are trained in Aberdeen and other medical mycology centres in the rest of the UK. Upon obtaining their degrees, these students then return home with their new skills to help address critical fungal research and training needs in their own countries.

"Fungal infections are understudied and under-diagnosed compared with other infectious diseases, despite their contribution to so many deaths every year," explains Professor Gordon Brown from the UA's AFG, who led the setup of the AFGrica Unit.

"Fungal infections kill more people in Africa than anywhere else on the planet. The AFGrica Unit is a unique opportunity to address the urgent need to improve basic knowledge and clinical management of fungal infections in Africa.

"This research and training centre gives us a foothold in Africa and the opportunity to collaborate with our colleagues at UCT to create a truly unique facility that will advance research to combat fungal killers, and just as importantly, to train more African experts specialising in this area."

Professor Mark Nicol, head of UCT's Division of Medical Microbiology in the Department of Pathology and member of the IDM said: "This is a wonderful opportunity to develop a centre of excellence for fungal infections on the African continent. We will have the opportunity to extend the pioneering clinical research on fungal infections taking place at UCT by collaborating with scientists studying the biology and immunology of fungal infections at the world-leading centre in Aberdeen."

Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the UA added: "The University of Aberdeen is an outward-looking, global institution, committed to changing the world with better research and teaching and the new AFGrica centre is a prime example of these core values.

"The expertise of our world-leading Aberdeen Fungal Group is recognised across the globe and this important partnership with the University of Cape Town will put our experts on the front line in the fight against these infections that currently prove deadly to so many people, especially in sub-Saharan Africa."

Professor Bongani Mayosi, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT, said: "The establishment of the AFGrica Unit in the Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine will enhance the excellent clinical and basic research that is taking place on cryptococcal meningitis and other fungal diseases in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT. This initiative will also contribute to the training of a new generation of African scientific leaders, who will produce high-quality research to combat the scourge of fungal infections in Africa."

The official opening of the AFGrica Unit will be held at 3pm (South African Standard Time) today, 11 August 2017, in Wolfson Pavilion at the IDM, UCT. The opening will be

addressed by Professor Mayosi, Professor Gordon Brown, Professor Sir Ian Diamond, and Dr Max Price (Vice-Chancellor, UCT).

All are welcome to attend.

Ends

Notes to Editors

About University of Cape Town

Founded in 1829, the University of Cape Town (UCT) has a proud tradition of academic excellence and effecting social change and development through its pioneering scholarship, faculty and students. UCT has 28,000 students, a third of whom are postgraduates and a fifth from other countries. Consistently ranked as the leading university in Africa (QS, THE) and currently fourth in BRICS (THE), UCT aims to be the premier academic meeting point between Africa and the rest of the world.

UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences' research enterprise is dynamic and fast growing. It aims to advance and encourage excellent research in the context of the vision and mission of the faculty and university. Through its 13 departments and 34 research groupings, this faculty leads high-quality research programmes, trains future research leaders and provides advice and counsel to health organisations around the world, at UCT. The faculty hosts UCT's largest research entity, the Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine (IDM) in which the new Wellcome Centre for Infectious Diseases Research in Africa (CIDRI-Africa) is based.

About University of Aberdeen

Established in 1495, the University of Aberdeen (UA) is the fifth oldest in the UK and is consistently ranked in the top 1% of the world's universities.

Located in Europe's oil and gas capital, the University is renowned for its world-leading research in health, energy, food and nutrition and environmental and biological sciences. The institution is also a cultural leader in the north-east, Scotland and beyond and has an outstanding track-record for arts and humanities research. A total of 76% of Aberdeen's research was judged 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent' through the UK's most recent Research Excellence Framework (REF 2014)

With a community of students and staff covering 120 nationalities, the University of Aberdeen has a global outlook and reach, and in 2016 was ranked by Times Higher Education in the top 40 of the world's 200 'most international universities'.

In July 2016 the university was named among the top five universities in the UK for graduate employment with 96.6%.

The Aberdeen Fungal Group is one of the largest medical mycology groups in the world. Its scientists are internationally recognised leaders with a uniquely broad scope of activities.

In February 2016, the MRC Centre for Medical Mycology was created at the UA to spearhead innovative research and training to generate knowledge that will improve the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of fungal diseases. The centre is the first MRC Centre dedicated to the field of medical mycology.

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