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07 September 2017

UCT hosts international congress to highlight child and adolescent mental health and autism in Africa

The University of Cape Town's Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry is hosting the first ever International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) on African soil – in conjunction with the 19th Congress of the South African Association for Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions (SA-ACAPAP).

The congress, which will take place from today until 9 September 2017 at the Spier Conference Centre in Stellenbosch, will bring together international experts in mental health and autism, with a particular focus on Africa. It is expected to be a milestone in tackling the needs of the millions of Africans suffering mental health disorders or autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

World-leading clinical researchers scheduled to address the conference include Prof Simon Baron-Cohen (Cambridge, UK), Prof Geraldine Dawson (Duke, USA) and Prof Helmut Remschmidt (Marburg, Germany).

Prof Petrus de Vries, who is the Sue Struengmann Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at UCT and Chairman of the Congress, said: "I am delighted that we will have about 300 participants from more than 25 countries. We had over 150 presentations submitted from all over the world. It is proof of worldwide interest in the needs of the African continent, and of growth in African research in child and adolescent mental health, autism and related neurodevelopmental disorders."

Prof de Vries added that they have also joined forces with the African Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, the Paediatric Neurology and Developmental Association of Southern Africa and the South African Institute for Sensory Integration.

"We really wanted this meeting to be as joined-up as possible. One of the highlights will be an African autism stakeholder event to bring together professionals, families and individuals with ASD," he said.

Prof de Vries concluded: "I sincerely hope that this congress will just be the start of an African movement to improve mental health care for children and adolescents, and to develop appropriate ways to support children, adolescents and families who live with ASD."

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Mental health disorders are the leading cause of burden of disease in children and adolescents. At least 1 in 5 young people will have a diagnosable mental health problem, yet fewer than 10-20% of children in Africa ever receive diagnosis and treatment for these disorders.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are seen in 1-2% of the population, yet services for the diagnosis, treatment and education of children with ASD are almost non-existent in Africa, and very little research has been done about autism in Africa to date.

Africa has a population in excess of 1.2 billion, and half of Africa is under the age of 18. Yet, for the entire continent there are about 60 specialist child and adolescent psychiatrists. It is clear that the needs are vast, and resources extremely limited.

Please see the [website](#) for further details.

Media enquiries can be directed to [Prof Petrus de Vries](#) or [Denise Kemp](#).

ENDS

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