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## **UCT leading programme to reduce child death rates in Africa**

While the world has made progress in reducing the number of child deaths every year, sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest mortality rates for children under five years of age. One in every 13 children in the region dies before the age of five, compared to one in every 189 in high-income countries. The University of Cape Town (UCT)'s African Paediatric Fellowship Programme (APFP) is addressing the paediatric medical skills shortage in Africa to prevent treatable diseases and infections responsible for the deaths of these children.

Professor Jo Wilmshurst, director of the APFP programme, said: "Through the APFP programme, African doctors are trained as paediatricians and sub-specialists in much needed areas, such as neonatology and oncology, to name a few. The training, whilst at an international standard, also equips these doctors to implement change in resource limited settings."

The goal of APFP is to partner with as many academic institutions as possible and invite them to nominate trainees to further their knowledge and skills at UCT. With specific focus on paediatrics, the nominated trainees can either specialise in general paediatrics or another sub-speciality. After completing the programme, fellows return to their home countries with the skills and confidence to build their paediatric healthcare capacity.

"These doctors return home to provide specialist care and capacity in their communities. The programme is building a network of leaders in child health across the continent. The current retention rate and constant innovations initiated by these doctors is unprecedented. It is a privilege to be part of this programme and to work with the APFP family," Wilmshurst added.

APFP alumnus and head of department at the Lusaka Teaching Hospital, as well as being the only neonatal doctor in Zambia's public sector, Dr Kunda Mutesu-Kapembwa, works tirelessly to empower other health workers to make a difference to child healthcare. "It's important to have specialists in Africa. It's important, because when you are not specialised, there is a certain level of thinking where you end," Mutesu-Kapembwa emphasised.

Dr Kondwani Kawaza, also an APFP alumnus, became Malawi's first neonatologist and played a pivotal role in the research, development and implementation of the low-cost continuous positive airway pressure Pumani machine (Pumani is a Chichewa word meaning "breathe" or "breathe restfully") which delivers a constant flow of air to the baby, helping air sacks in the lungs to remain open, while preventing sleep apnoea.

Since introducing this innovation, child mortality rates in Malawi have decreased significantly.

Dr Joyce Balagadde-Kambugu, another alumnus, became Uganda's first paediatric oncologist after returning from her fellowship at UCT. "I can say without hesitation that the outlook on childhood cancer in Uganda changed because of the training I did. When I went back, I was equipped with not only the knowledge but also the skills that I needed to start a dedicated paediatric oncology service," she shared.

Programmes such as UCT's APFP are helping to build capacity around the region and are a major step in combatting Africa's high child mortality rate thereby giving African youth a chance at a better future.

## **ENDS**

***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

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