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## **UCT's leading TB researcher receives top international science prize**

Leading tuberculosis (TB) researcher and head of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Division of Pulmonology, Professor Keertan Dheda, has been awarded the 2018 Scientific Leadership prize by the prestigious European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP).

TB is the leading infectious fatal disease in South Africa, with over a billion deaths over two centuries and is now the most common single cause of death in the country.

The Scientific Leadership prize, awarded to "an excellent scientist in Africa working on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected infectious diseases within the scope of the EDCTP2 programme", carries with it a purse of R170 000, to be used for further research-related activities.

The prize was among four that were presented in recognition of research excellence at the opening ceremony of the 9th EDCTP Forum in Lisbon, Portugal, recently. They recognise significant achievements by outstanding individuals and research teams from Africa and Europe, including their "major" contributions to the EDCTP objectives of strengthening research capacity on the continent, and supporting south-south and north-south networking.

Professor Dheda, who also heads UCT's Centre for Lung Infection and Immunity, has focused his research on the design and evaluation of user-friendly diagnostic tools and interventions for drug-sensitive and drug-resistant TB.

One example of Professor Dheda's significant influence can be found in the improved diagnosis of TB among hospitalised patients with advanced HIV across Africa. Performing a multicentric study in four countries involving more than 2 500 patients, he headed up a team of researchers who evaluated a new user-friendly urine-based diagnostic test (urine LAM).

"We showed that the urine LAM-guided treatment strategy reduced mortality in hospitalised patients with advanced HIV by almost 20% (Lancet, 2016), and these

findings underpinned the World Health Organisation guidelines on TB testing in HIV-infected persons," he explained.

Professor Dheda, current president of the South African Thoracic Society, had his interest in TB first sparked when he began working as an intern at King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban after graduating from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1992.

Dismayed by the high number of deaths of TB patients, and the inadequate diagnostic tools and available treatment regimens, he became part of a long line of pulmonologists and their associated professional societies leading the fight against the disease.

In addition, Professor Dheda has developed five patents related to TB and other research areas.

The EDCTP, with a cyclical budget of more than R11 billion, funds clinical research to accelerate the development of new or improved drugs, vaccines, microbicides and diagnostics against HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, as well as other poverty-driven infectious diseases in sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on Phase 2 and Phase 3 trials.

At the end of 2017, when he received an A rating from the National Research Foundation, Professor Dheda said his laboratory was working on several innovative new technologies, including "a new urine-based TB diagnostic test, a next generation electronic lateral flow assay device, and a new pleural biopsy device".

In other work, he and his team defined how newer frontline molecular TB tools should be used for on-site diagnosis in clinics (Lancet, 2014), and for active case finding in the community (Lancet Infectious Diseases, 2017).

Professor Dheda has authored more than 240 peer-reviewed papers, including four first or senior-author original publications in The Lancet, and is the recipient of several other notable awards, including the Oppenheimer Award and the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease Scientific Award.

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