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UCT team plays central role in R5 billion historic silicosis gold miners case

University of Cape Town (UCT) academics [Dr Shahieda Adams](#) and [Professor Mohamed Jeebhay](#) were part of a team that played an integral role in providing technical medical input to the legal arguments in South Africa's historic R5 billion settlement for the gold miners who contracted silicosis and/or pulmonary tuberculosis (TB) at work.

The settlement marked an important milestone in the fight not only against TB, but also for workers' rights and for improved industry exposure standards. Silicosis is an occupational lung disease caused by the inhalation of silica dust, and is particularly prevalent in gold mines. The case for including TB in the class action was more complex. But adamant to do so, human rights attorney Charles Abrahams approached Jeebhay and Adams.

Being an occupational medicine consultant and heading the Occupational Medicine Clinic at Groote Schuur Hospital, where ex-mineworkers are seen every week, provided good exposure to better understanding the clinical presentations of these workers in relation to their mine dust.

By combining the available – albeit scarce – research, Adams's clinical work and her PhD research analysing TB in healthcare workers, she and Jeebhay, together with other technical team members, made a case for the plausibility of the link to TB in silica-exposed workers. This has, for the first time in South Africa, forced mining employers to accept that TB can be caused by high levels of silica dust present in gold mines.

South Africa continues to struggle with the TB epidemic, carrying one of the highest burdens of the disease worldwide. Despite available treatments and the South African government's concerted efforts to tackle the disease, TB remains one of the leading causes of death in the country.

Jeebhay added that their involvement in class-action suits illustrates that the university is engaging with issues “at this interface with big social problems. UCT is there to protect human rights, protect the environment, assist with social security issues and with health,” he said.

“We see it as our role as engaged scholars to be dealing with these big issues.” Overall, though, Jeebhay and Adams’s work is about improving society.

“We want people to have a good quality of life, gainful employment and opportunities that, historically, they have not had access to,” said Jeebhay. “For us, if these things are addressed, you feel that there is at least some justice in the world.”

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Dr Shahieda Adams (left) and Professor Mohamed Jeebhay

Credit: Michael Hammond/UCT

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Note to editors:

On 26 July 2019, the Gauteng High Court in Johannesburg made its historic ruling in favour of mineworkers affected by silicosis and/or pulmonary TB. It was historic for the R5 billion settlement but also for the inclusion of TB as being eligible for compensation. The case was first proposed in 2012 and certified as a class-action lawsuit in 2016. It was organised by Richard Spoor Incorporated Attorneys, Abraham Kiewitz Inc and the Legal Resources Centre.

The six mining companies that have agreed to pay compensation are African Rainbow Minerals, Anglo American, AngloGold Ashanti, Gold Fields, Harmony and Sibanye-Stillwater. These six companies form the Occupational Lung Disease (OLD) working group. Over the next 12 years, the R5 billion settlement will be distributed through a fund administered by the Tshiamiso Trust. Affected mineworkers and the families of those who have lost their lives will receive between R70 000 and R500 000, depending on the claimant class. These classes, of which there are 10, are based on the severity of their conditions.

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