2 June 2021

UCT scientist awarded prestigious AXA Research Chair in Non-Communicable Diseases

Lara Dugas, an Honorary Professor in Human Biology at the University of Cape Town (UCT), has been awarded a prestigious AXA Research Chair, titled The AXA Research Chair in Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) Epidemiology. The Chair is only the second awarded to a researcher in Africa and will allow Dugas to continue her ongoing research into how the lived environment impacts long-term NCD outcomes in African populations.

Dugas is honoured to be named the latest Chair. "I am the first in my family to receive a university degree. When I finished my PhD, I didn't even know that positions like this existed. I have been extremely fortunate to have found a career that I feel so passionate about, and to be surrounded by so many incredible mentors and collaborators. This work really is built on the shoulders of giants."

Her specific focus is to understand how lifestyle, including habitual diet and physical activity, alters the gut microbiota and changes NCD risk.

The Chair will support a global research partnership between UCT and Loyola University Chicago (LUC), where Dugas also holds the position of Associate Professor of Global Public Health and Epidemiology in the Department of Public Health Sciences.

"It will permit us to combine three large cohorts from both UCT and LUC to understand the intersection between infectious, communicable diseases and NCD risk," said Dugas. "My primary funded research has focused on NCDs in African-origin populations. UCT has been a collaborator in my research since 2008. This is an amazing culmination of this partnership. The Chair will allow me to be based full-time at UCT, while still engaging in my internationally funded cohort studies. This will be critical to the success of the Chair's goals."

Second chair awarded in Africa
The Chair is one of only 66 that have ever been awarded by the AXA Research Fund, which seeks to "create a dedicated full-time senior academic position in an institution which supports a significant acceleration in the development of a research field and fosters a step-change in the career of the appointed AXA Professor." The Chair offers a €1M, five-year award. The first Chair was awarded to UCT's Professor Mark New, director of the African Climate and Development Initiative in 2016.

A global research network

According to Dugas, the Chair will support three important research collaborations. "Firstly, our goal is to conduct world-class research by combining several large cohort studies to understand the intersection between long-term infectious disease and chronic NCD outcomes. Second, we will focus on capacity building by funding one senior research associate and two postdoctoral researchers within UCT's School of Public Health & Family Medicine. Third, as part of a long-term strategy, we want to create a research environment that crosses departments and schools to bring together current NCD expertise. This will advance our understanding of the uniquely African NCD milieu," she said.

Dugas is also hopeful that this collaboration will expand both UCT's and LUC's global public health footprints, not only through bi-directional exchanges between the two universities, but also throughout her current international research collaborations in Ghana, Jamaica, Seychelles and the United States.

Lara Dugas   Photo: Supplied

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