



**Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement**

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT sets its sights on conquering cancer

Despite being on the brink of elimination, more than 600 000 women develop cervical cancer each year. Of that number, 300 000 are lost to the disease. This loss of life has innumerable repercussions for both the women's families and their communities, leading not only to a breakdown of the family unit but also spiralling cycles of poverty.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) Gynaecological Cancer Research Centre (GCRC) recently held a screening of *Conquering Cancer*, a feature documentary aimed at showing the world that global cervical cancer elimination is possible.

Overcoming illness

Conquering Cancer introduces viewers to the medical professionals and policymakers who are working towards eliminating cervical cancer through medical interventions and socio-economic programmes.

The film follows a number of women across the world, from Australia to Malaysia, Zambia, Colombia, Switzerland, and the United States of America, documenting their experiences with cervical cancer. It highlights the dichotomy between the outstanding innovations that are paving the way towards the global elimination of the illness and the effects it has on the health and economic well-being of the world's poorest women.

Professor Lynette Denny, head of UCT's Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, said the World Health Organization has called for the elimination of cervical cancer by 2030. "This is a really important programme and may well work to galvanise the world's energy to stopping this preventable cancer," she said. In addition to this, Denny acknowledged that the event was an opportunity to celebrate and discuss the issues around survivorship.

Eliminating myths and fears

Dr Nomonde Mbatani, an obstetrician and gynaecologist at UCT's Private Academic Hospital, spoke about the myths and fears about cancer among women in South Africa. Many of these myths and fears, Mbatani said, revolve around the causes of cancer as well as the survival rate of those who develop the illness.

"We know that cancer is a public health problem and is one of the leading causes of death. However, people need to be reminded that heart disease and respiratory disease remain the leading causes of death globally and in South Africa.

“Many cancers that were once thought to be incurable can now be cured, thanks to new diagnostic and treatment techniques. We see now that the survival rate for most cancers is about six to seven percent,” she said.

This understanding, Mbatani explained, is essential for lowering the feelings of fear and anxiety that patients who are diagnosed with cancer may have and therefore better equipping them to deal with the illness.

Focusing on quality of life

Radiation oncologist in UCT’s Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Dr Nazia Fakie emphasised the importance of quality of life for cancer survivors and the role of healthcare professionals in enhancing this quality of life.

“There have been many studies that show cervical cancer survivors specifically have worse quality of life than other gynaecological cancer survivors. It is therefore imperative that we are aware of the long-term side effects that follow radiotherapy. We need to address these issues prior to treatment, during treatment and, especially, following treatment,” she said.

“We need to provide support for both the lifestyle changes and the psychological effects that occur following radiotherapy treatment. What is most important here is to talk to your patients.

“Although it’s easier to put them on the bed and examine them, we actually need to talk to them. To ask them about their symptoms and probe for more information. While there is some information that they will volunteer, specific questions usually need to be asked about things like sexual health. We need to get comfortable with talking to patients and asking these questions because at the end of the day, it will improve their quality of life and therefore our quality of care,” she added.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Ridovhona Mbulaheni

Media Liaison Assistant
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 2333
Cell: (064) 905 3807
Email: ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za