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UCT honours renowned women's health champion in South Africa



Professor Lynette Denny

Photo: Michael Hammond

Former head of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the director of the university's Gynaecological Cancer Research Centre (GCRC), Lynette Denny, was recently given a special thanksgiving event to honour and celebrate her decades of service to the women of low- and middle-income countries.

A steadfast, kind, selfless and fearless leader, and a champion for women's health in the country and on the continent is how family, friends and colleagues described renowned cervical cancer researcher. The event was hosted by UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS).

During her illustrious career, which spans almost four decades as part of the fabric of UCT and Groote Schuur Hospital, she has made giant strides in the fight against cervical cancer. Her unwavering spirit has led to ground-breaking research that has improved and saved the lives of thousands of women.

In recognition of her work, she has also received a list of impressive awards, including the Order of the Baobab (Silver) from President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2021, recognising her work as a leading researcher in cervical cancer and its association with the human papilloma virus (HPV).

Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, UCT Vice-Chancellor (VC), said: "Your community-based research is inspiring, especially in how you involve people in your work, and your focus on providing innovative, accessible, safe and effective methods for preventing cervical cancer. You bring your standard of excellence not only to your research and clinical work, but also to the environment where you and your team treat patients.

Dr Mamphela Ramphela, a friend and former UCT VC, said she knows Denny not as a professor, not as a doctor, not as all of the beautiful things she is, but as a human being, who continues to teach her and everybody who she encounters, what it means to be human. "To be human is to be connected to others, and in time, dependent on others, and to be part of the web of life. That's what makes Lyn so different from the rest of us," she said.

The dean of the FHS, Associate Professor Lionel Green-Thompson, said the story of Denny is the story of how women stand alongside other women, often in order to build a changed society for us. "I suspect that as you speak up for women's rights and the rights of women on the margins, you speak with love, and I wanted to share with the faculty my own deep gratitude to Lyn, " he said.

During the event, Denny's friends, colleagues and loved ones took to the podium to share a few reflections and personal anecdotes. Professor Mushi Matjila, head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, said: "It's appropriate for the faculty to celebrate Professor Lyn Denny – the icon; the icon who has led the department with integrity, kindness, compassion and exceptional vision. Her leadership can only be described as that of servitude.

"Lyn is a respected, grounded and an often-consulted global expert in the field of women's health, and she's a fearless and vocal advocate for women, particularly women from poor and marginalised backgrounds. She's always been an eloquent and robust advocate against all forms of injustice, in particular racial injustice and discrimination. And it's appropriate that we celebrate Prof Denny's achievements in the context of Women's Month."

Professor Landon Myer, former head of the Department of Public Health and Family Medicine, said: "I know Lyn as someone of exceedingly high standards, as a teacher, scientist and a colleague; someone who expects excellence from herself

and all those around her. I know Lyn as a person of tremendous personal compassion and humanity. We have become stronger as a result of your bravery and speaking truth and speaking honestly.”

Dr Nomonde Mbatani, colleague, mentee and friend, said she had wonderful times with Denny, who introduced her to different forms of religion and spirituality. She said as a unit, they continue to uphold her teachings of ensuring the best care for their patients, and to respect all people are around them.

Denny said she has learned that research is a necessity, not a luxury, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where resources are limited. She said the essence of research is relationships, connections, clarity, insight, empathy, and ultimately, the passion to improve patients’ lives with high-quality evidence-based interventions.

As researchers continue their work in the field, Denny said it’s important that they understand the consequences of inequity, poverty, neglect, loss of dignity, alienation, and marginalisation, and how all of these impact women’s lives. Therefore, she said, healthcare must be designed for the people, by the people.

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