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## **Exceptional UCT scholars awarded prestigious scholarship to study at Oxford University**

Two University of Cape Town (UCT) graduates are among the 2023 cohort of 10 Rhodes Scholars-elect from the Southern African constituency. Dr Mary Gouws and UCT's Dr Joshua Fieggen will further their postgraduate studies at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom from next year.

According to the Rhodes Trust, the scholarship is the oldest and perhaps the most prestigious international scholarship programme in the world. It presents young, emerging academics with a life-changing opportunity to pursue full-time postgraduate study at one of the world's leading academic institutions.



Dr Mary Gouws.

Photo: Supplied

As a girl, Gouws wanted to be a detective but “wasn't brave enough” to join the police force. Instead, she chose to find solutions for sick people, a bit like the TV series anti-hero Dr House. Now a medical intern in the Eastern Cape, the UCT graduate has learnt to think on

her feet in the province's poorly resourced facilities. She's a problem-solver and a worthy 2023 Rhodes Scholar-elect.

A scholar at the Diocesan School for Girls in Makhanda, Gouws was on the Independent Examinations Board's Outstanding list for 2014 and in the top 1% for five of her matric subjects. She was school dux and earned a host of awards and commendations for community work.

She followed suit at UCT, was top of her class throughout the MBChB programme (2015 to 2020), collecting a raft of prizes along the way. In her final year, Gouws was president of the UCT Internal Medicine Society. At university she missed the camaraderie of playing in an orchestra and so got involved with the UCT Health Sciences Orchestra.

Always looking for opportunities to help others, Gouws tutored medical students and worked as a volunteer and committee member at the mobile Students' Health and Welfare Centres Organisation (SHAWCO) clinic in Khayelitsha.

But it was always the challenge of piecing things together that attracted her to medicine. "[It was] the idea of being faced with a series of symptoms and signs and being able to put these together to come to a diagnosis, and then to treat the disease process. Ultimately, I aim to be a problem-solver – for individual patients and for broader challenges," she said. "My experiences at SHAWCO clinics combined with working in the Eastern Cape has contributed to my passion for working in resource-limited settings."

The province's health facilities have also tested Gouws' versatility as a medical intern where she has worked at Livingstone Tertiary, Dora Nginza Hospital and several clinics in the Nelson Mandela Bay District. At each, Gouws witnessed the hard consequences of inadequate clinical governance and poor resourcing.

"It has been challenging having to account to patients for difficulties in our healthcare system, and why, for example, they must wait for extended periods for an operation or for a specialist appointment."

Once she completes her internship at the end of 2022, she will work as a community service medical officer at a community health centre in Gqeberha – until she packs for Oxford. Her experiences in the province have been formative in other ways.

"I used to always envision myself in purely clinical medicine. But in the past two years, I've realised that there are several other important dimensions that need work in our healthcare system," said Gouws.

These include research, clinical management, and ethical practice. "These are components of healthcare that I want to learn about and contribute to in the South African healthcare system, and I think studying at Oxford University will give me a good base for this."

There is also the aspect of diverse thinking and practices she is keen to expand. Starting at Oxford in September next year, Gouws aims to enter the Master of Science in International Health Science and Tropical Medicine programme. Her plan is to continue with a DPhil in clinical medicine before returning to South Africa to specialise in internal medicine.



Dr Joshua Fieggen.

Photo: Supplied

Fieggen, a UCT MBChB alumnus and a master's-in-waiting graduate, is a junior medical doctor at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital (CHBAH) in Johannesburg, and an aspiring epidemiology and biostatistics researcher. He graduated with his MBChB from UCT in 2020 and has just completed his master's in public health. Fieggen will graduate on 14 December.

"Being awarded this scholarship has been an incredible privilege and affirmation of the work I have put in over the years. However, it has also been an important source of reflection about what it means to be awarded a Southern African scholarship that still bears the name of Cecil John Rhodes. More broadly, it acknowledges the series of privileges that have led to me being in a position to be awarded this opportunity," Fieggen said.

Fieggen will study towards a PhD in one of two disciplines: population health or primary healthcare. He said he's looking forward to expanding his current interest by using routinely collected health data to improve health outcomes for patients in the long-term. His goal, he explained, is to use the routinely available data to develop a machine learning tool that will streamline the healthcare service offering and optimise patients' experiences in healthcare facilities. Machine learning is a branch of artificial intelligence and computer science that focuses on the use of data and algorithms to imitate the way humans learn to improve accuracy.

During his time at Oxford, Fieggen will make it his mission to ensure that his digital tool will be designed in such a way that it directly addresses some of South Africa's most pressing health challenges, which, he added, relate to large in-hospital patient numbers and a lack of resources. He has experienced this first-hand at CHBAH.

As Fieggen packs up his home and plans to bid CHBAH and South Africa farewell for now, he says he hopes that when he returns, he'll be able to use his research to make an impact on South Africa's public healthcare system and improve the service for many South Africans.

"I guess that's what research is all about: using data to improve health outcomes and ultimately improve people's quality of life. Digital health presents such a fantastic opportunity to do this. I hope that when I return, we can put some of this work into practice," he added.

*Story by UCT News.*

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