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## Healthcare practitioners must understand the needs of the people they serve – UCT lecture

*Practise the spirit of ubuntu to achieve social accountability*



Professor Lionel Green-Thompson

Photo: Lerato Maduna

Amplifying the voices of people living on the margins of society is an ethical imperative for healthcare scholars. It helps them to understand the needs of the people they serve to improve their quality of life, said University of Cape Town's (UCT) Professor Lionel Green-Thompson, dean of UCT's [Faculty of Health Sciences \(FHS\)](#), during his recent inaugural lecture.

"The inaugural lecture is not a moment of triumph in the traditional sense. It's the culmination of a mosaic of different experiences over a long career, and these last years have been characterised by accounts that have brought me a great sense of joy," he said

during a packed lecture theatre on the health sciences campus to celebrate his ascent to full professor – marking a significant milestone in his career.

### **A misunderstood concept**

Titled: “From village to the globe: reflections on a journey in social accountability”, his lecture explored social accountability in health professions education and underscored the important role institutions play in aligning teaching, research and service with the priority health needs of the communities they serve.

He said the term social accountability is often misunderstood. Scholars believe that the institutions they represent have an obligation to direct their teaching, research and service endeavours towards the priority health concerns of the community. Yet this doesn’t aid social accountability. What’s at the heart of it is co-creation, between institutions of learning and the agencies that govern people.

“We don’t always agree that it is true. But we have an obligation to sit together and craft what the solutions should look like,” Green-Thompson said.

### **How we become accountable**

Green-Thompson said adopting social accountability and service to the people requires that health education institutions work from within the partnership pentagram, a collaborative framework used in healthcare and social sectors to engage five to six key stakeholder groups.

“The partnership pentagram is an essential lens with which to look at how we become accountable. Policy makers, health administrators, health professionals, communities and academic institutions are all part of this continuous moving cycle of partnerships and relationships, which are integral,” he said.

Green-Thompson cited an academic article by a Makerere University researcher in Uganda to support his point, saying the piece highlighted the importance of moving from responsiveness to accountability, especially for institutions of learning. He said this was a “real thing” for institutions like UCT that work closely with communities.

“But I am not sure we can account for what these communities think of us,” he said.

### **What communities need**

Green-Thompson gave colleagues in the room some food for thought: “If we left Vanguard Community Health Centre tomorrow, would the people be better off?”  
“I think we don’t know.”

Why? The mechanisms to ensure that healthcare workers understand what patients in communities need are missing. Therefore, it’s crucial that doctors understand their patients’ needs and what their presence has on the people they serve. “For me, that’s the nature of this. Accountability means that our aims are defined by society,” he said.

Referring to his PhD, he said he interviewed community members to understand what they need and want from the doctors who treat them. And while they did not explicitly use the

term social accountability, their response spoke volumes. What they said they need is for doctors to practise the spirit of ubuntu.

### **Deepen notions**

Green-Thompson reminded the audience of a letter he wrote to students and staff in the faculty at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, on the eve of the Level 5 lockdown in 2020.

In the letter, he acknowledged the uncertain time the faculty, the university, the country and the globe had entered. And as the university prepared to make contingency plans, he committed to listening with compassion, walking with humility and acting with justice.

Now is the time to deepen those notions, he advised at his lecture held six years later on Tuesday, 7 April 2026.

“We really have to deepen the sense that compassion means we have to engage deeply with the community’s needs; humility means we foster equal partnerships, whether they’re in the university, with province, or with the community,” he concluded.

“And perhaps, the next step for us is achieving systemic change.

*Story by: Niémah Davids, UCT News*

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