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19 May 2026

UCT researcher leads international effort to improve chronic disease care

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is among the institutions leading two major projects focusing on implementation science for health systems strengthening in the context of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Funded under the 10th 2025 South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and Global Alliance for Chronic Disease (GACD) funding call, \$400 000 is invested in health research to assess strategies for supporting health systems and improving equity in outcomes of NCDs care in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The first project will explore how strengthening care pathways can improve patient outcomes at primary care level. The STRIDES project, led by Associate Professor Peter Delobelle from UCT and Dr Tilahun Haregu from The Baker Institute, will strengthen primary healthcare teams in South Africa and Uganda to deliver integrated, people-centred care for chronic diseases, creating a scalable model for other low- and middle-income countries.

Research in Uganda and Tanzania, published in *The Lancet*, has demonstrated that integrated chronic care for HIV, diabetes and hypertension is both effective and cost-saving. In South Africa, research has shown that strengthening the collaboration between community- and facility-based primary care services can improve NCD outcomes.

Associate Professor Delobelle, chief research officer at UCT's [Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa](#), said: "Chronic NCDs, such as hypertension and diabetes, are rising rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) alongside an already existing high HIV prevalence. Strengthening integrated care pathways for patients living with these conditions will improve treatment adherence and retention in care."

Delobelle said that many health systems in SSA lack the capacity to deliver comprehensive integrated care for patients living with HIV and chronic NCDs. He added that strengthening integrated care pathways offers an opportunity to transform primary care systems from disease-specific care to a holistic, patient-centred approach, optimising strained health care resources and disease control.

The STRIDES project will strengthen NCDs outcomes by improving the technical and leadership capacity of community-orientated primary care teams, harmonising care

practices, integrating peer leaders into care delivery and leveraging digital platforms to support coordination and communication.

The second project seeks to understand why most people with chronic conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure stop treatment, especially people with mental health or substance use challenges. This will be done through a programme called 'Siyakhana' (building each other), which trains community health workers and adds peer recovery coaches to community-based health teams to better support patients with multiple conditions.

Led by Professor Bronwyn Myers of Curtin University, and supported by SAMRC's co-principal investigator Professor Nadine Harker, the study will test whether the Siyakhana programme can be affordably expanded to improve NCD care engagement among South African patients with mental health and substance use disorders.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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