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UCT professor wins prestigious L'Oréal-UNESCO International Science Award



UCT's Professor Liesl Zühlke has won the L'Oréal-UNESCO International Science Award. Photo: supplied.

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Professor Liesl Zühlke has been selected as the 2026 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science International Award Laureate for Africa and the Arab States in the field of Life and Environmental Sciences.

The prestigious international award recognises Professor Zühlke's exceptional contributions to cardiac and cardiovascular science, which have advanced global scientific knowledge and improved health outcomes for vulnerable populations, particularly women and children in low- and middle-income countries.

"I am deeply honoured and extremely humbled by this prestigious award. It represents decades of work, focused on children with rheumatic and congenital heart disease, with amazing team members from UCT, as well as with African and global colleagues," said Professor Zühlke.

“In addition, it also highlights the role of women in science. I have been deeply inspired by authentic, committed and courageous women scientists in my community, at UCT and beyond. I hope this award brings attention to the plight of childhood-onset heart disease, which remains neglected in the world.”

The [L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science International Awards](#) honour five exceptional women scientists annually for advancing scientific knowledge and strengthening gender representation in research. Established in 1998, the programme celebrates researchers whose work has had a significant impact on science and society. Each year, one laureate is selected from five global regions: Africa and the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America.

Professor Zühlke is director of the [Children's Heart Disease Research Unit](#) at UCT's [Faculty of Health Sciences \(FHS\)](#) and serves as vice-president for extramural research and internal portfolio at the South African Medical Research Council. As a paediatric cardiologist and globally respected researcher, she has dedicated her career to tackling childhood-onset heart diseases, particularly in underserved communities.

Her research focuses on congenital and rheumatic heart disease, heart failure and cardiovascular health in women of childbearing age, areas that continue to carry a substantial and growing disease burden despite receiving limited global research attention.

Professor Sharon Prince, acting deputy dean for research in FHS, said the award is a powerful recognition of research that changes lives. “Liesl is a remarkable scientist whose work has consistently bridged rigorous research with deep humanity. Her leadership has opened doors for new knowledge, stronger health systems and more equitable care for women and children across the continent.”

Professor Zühlke's work has had a far-reaching impact on public health across Africa, particularly in the understanding, prevention and treatment of rheumatic heart disease, a condition affecting more than 50 million people worldwide and responsible for over 360 000 deaths each year.

Through a research portfolio spanning basic science, clinical research, clinical trials, translational medicine, policy engagement and community-based initiatives, she has helped shape international priorities in rheumatic and congenital heart disease.

Her research has also advanced care for children born with congenital heart disease, especially in resource-limited settings where outcomes remain disproportionately poor. Recognising that children are often overlooked in global health metrics, including Disability-Adjusted Life Years and Quality-Adjusted Life Years, Professor Zühlke has consistently centred diseases of poverty affecting children, adolescents and marginalised communities.

Beyond academia, she is a leading advocate for children and families living with heart disease. Her contributions across local, regional and global platforms have influenced policy and strengthened efforts to improve equitable access to care. Through collaborations with organisations – including the African Union, World Health Organization and World Heart Federation – she has played an important role in advancing the research and policy agenda for children with heart disease.

Professor Zühlke has authored more than 230 peer-reviewed publications and her work has received over 91 000 citations globally. Her scholarship has informed policy shifts and

contributed to more inclusive research practices by amplifying the voices and lived experiences of patients historically excluded from decision-making processes.

Professor Prince added that Professor Zühlke's impact extends beyond research excellence. "What makes Liesl exceptional is not only the scale of her scientific contributions, but also the way she lifts others as she rises. She has mentored, inspired and created space for women scientists and young researchers to thrive, and that legacy is as important as any publication or award," she said.

Professor Zühlke's selection as a 2026 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science International Award Laureate recognises not only her scientific excellence and global leadership, but also her unwavering commitment to advancing health equity. Her achievement stands as an inspiration to the next generation of women scientists in Africa and around the world.

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