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## UCT cardiologist receives highest national order



Professor Karen Sliwa

Photo: UCT News

University of Cape Town's (UCT) [Professor Karen Sliwa-Hahnle](#), a world-renowned clinical cardiologist, has described the Order of Mapungubwe bestowed upon her as "meaningful recognition" of the more than two decades of outstanding work.

The award is South Africa's highest civilian national honour, conferred by the president to citizens who have achieved excellence and made international impact in various disciplines.

Professor Sliwa-Hahnle has dedicated her career to advancing research in priority heart-health areas, including peripartum cardiomyopathy (PPCM). As a cardiologist for pregnant women with heart disease, she has dedicated her career to researching pathophysiology, treatment options and awareness of PPCM – a life-threatening form of heart failure that

occurs in 1 in 1 000 women in the last month of pregnancy or up to five months post-partum. The condition weakens the heart muscle and dramatically reduces its pumping efficiency. Without therapy, PPCM leads to death in up to 20% of women. This global disease is particularly prevalent in African populations.

Sliwa-Hahnle is the director of UCT's [Cape Heart Institute](#), and over the years, her work has led to disease-specific therapy for PPCM. She continues to lead several African and global research projects that have made significant inroads into advancing knowledge of cardiovascular diseases common in Africa and other low- to middle-income countries, leading to notable policy changes.

Commenting on the award, she said: "I am deeply honoured to receive this prestigious award, bestowed by the president of South Africa – my home country of choice. It is a meaningful recognition of more than two decades of dedication, collaboration and teamwork with outstanding colleagues, patients and researchers.

"By receiving the Order of Mapungubwe, it highlights the importance of cardiovascular disease in pregnant women and the urgent need to reduce maternal mortality, particularly in Africa and other underserved regions."

She said that PPCM piqued her interest when her daughter's nanny developed the condition. It was then that she realised that little was known about this serious disease. She explained that their nanny's diagnosis sparked her commitment to conducting research in the field.

Sliwa-Hahnle has led research in the field of immune-activation, proteomic characterisation and advanced imaging, which led to better understanding the complex pathophysiology of the disease. In addition, she discovered a novel disease-specific therapeutic option (bromocriptine) for PPCM, which reduced one-year mortality by more than 50% and led to improved heart recovery, thereby improving long-term survival. To date, bromocriptine is the only proven specific intervention for PPCM, and the treatment is included in the European Society of Cardiology Guidelines for reducing mortality.

Through her work over the years, she has redefined cardiovascular research and care across South Africa, Africa and the world. She has also been named the most prolific cardiovascular researcher from Africa. She is a highly cited researcher with more than 500 publications in leading medical journals.

*Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News*

**ENDS**

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