

WITSIE AT THE CUTTING EDGE: Researcher Profile

Professor Karen Hofman

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Who are you and what is your academic/scientific background?

I am a University of the Witwatersrand Medical graduate and a Paediatrician. I received research training at Johns Hopkins in childhood disabilities, molecular and clinical genetics. During the many years I spent in the USA, I focused whenever possible on research related to sub-Saharan Africa. For the past two decades I have concentrated on Public Health. In 2009, I returned to South Africa where I am currently an Associate Professor at the MRC/Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Unit (Agincourt), in the School of Public Health, University of the Witwatersrand.



I have received the US National Institutes of Health Director's Award for "Exceptional leadership and commitment to build global capacity related to research bioethics in low- and middle-income countries" and the Fogarty Director's Special Recognition Award for "exemplary leadership of the Research in Sub-Saharan Africa conference".

What is the nature of the research which you are currently undertaking?

Economic evaluation is increasingly being used globally to contribute to evidence-based health policies. For the past four years, I have led a programme of work together with my colleague Professor Stephen Tollman, called PRICELESS SA (Priority Cost Effective Lessons in System Strengthening) (www.pricelessa.ac.za). One key issue that has been important and critical to our success is our on-going communication with policymakers. The South African Medical Research Council and the National Department of Health has now decided to fund PRICELESS for 2013-2016. We will focus on "best buys" for maternal and child health. We are also performing some interesting research on the obesogenic environment and the fiscal and legislative levers needed to address the growing obesity epidemic in South Africa.

What do you think is the most significant contribution you have made to research/science?

Most recently, research conducted by the PRICELESS team on the number of lives and costs saved by reducing salt in bread. This evidence contributed to government legislation that was passed to regulate salt in processed food.

During my period at Johns Hopkins I established the first clinic for children with Down's syndrome and their families. Finally, as Director of the Policy office at the Fogarty Center at NIH, I led the development of several new funding programmes for training researchers in low and middle income countries. One of these programmes, the first of its kind in the world, was focused on injuries.

Did you have a particular mentor or supervisor who inspired you in research?

There are several individuals who have inspired me. To mention a few, from my days as a medical student and beyond: Professor John Pettifor who enabled me very early in my career to experience excellence in paediatric research at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, Professor Harry Seftel who shaped my world view on the value of population health research and Professor Marian Jacobs who during a sabbatical in Cape Town, showed me the critical connection between research and policy.

Tell us about what you do when you're not busy at work and carrying out cutting-edge research?

I enjoy yoga and swimming, spending time with my husband and two sons and reading about South African history.

I also loves travelling anywhere i can in this amazing country.

Read one of Karen's papers: Hofman KJ, Tollman SM (2010). Setting Priorities for Health in 21st Century South Africa. South African Medical Journal, 100(12): 798-800.