



E D C T P



This project is part of the EDCTP2 programme supported by the European Union

Wits Researcher awarded prestigious EDCTP Senior Fellowship

Dr Christina Thobakgale, a researcher at the School of Pathology, is among fellows from sub-Saharan Africa to be awarded a five year European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) Senior Fellowship who will receive up to €500,000 to conduct research. Her research will investigate innate and virological mechanisms associated with control in HIV controllers - these are individuals who maintain low HIV viral loads and high CD4+ T cell counts for years in the absence of antiretroviral treatment (ART).

“What is striking about this group of individuals is that they have high levels of inflammation which put them at high risk of non-AIDS related complications such as cardiovascular diseases, neurocognitive disorders, renal, bone and liver dysfunction and frailty. This is particularly a concern where despite the universal antiretroviral treatment guidelines and South Africa having the largest ART programme in the world, less than 65% of HIV infected individuals were receiving treatment; it is possible that HIV controllers comprise this group”- states the researcher.

She adds, “factors previously reported to explain control in HIV controllers do not fully explain this phenotype as half of the individuals do not possess these features”. Thus, her research aims to identify additional signatures with a focus on innate immune mechanisms in an effort to address some of the priorities for HIV cure research; mainly how hosts control HIV replication in the absence of therapy and contributors of immune activation and inflammation in HIV controllers. The latter undermines the effectiveness of ART and good health for those infected with the virus.

Christina completed her PhD at the University of KwaZulu-Natal where her research focused on T cell responses in Paediatric HIV-infection. She later did her Postdoctoral training at the Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT & Harvard (USA) on innate immune responses to HIV before returning to South Africa where she served as a Senior Researcher, teaching and supervising postgraduate students at University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is an Affiliate of the African Academy of Sciences and a South African Academy of Sciences alumni. In 2018, she joined the School of Pathology at the University of the Witwatersrand based at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases as a Senior Researcher, she supervises postgraduate students. She is a C2 NRF-rated researcher and is among the participants nominated from the 26 South African Universities for the first phase of the Future Professors Programme (FPP) by the Department of Higher Education and Training which commenced in January 2020. The FPP is a capacity building programme and a national project aimed at accelerating the readiness of young academics for the professoriate.

The EDCTP Fellowship support potential researchers to advance themselves as research leaders through clinical trials and closely related fields to become long term trainers and mentors for junior researchers with emphasis on hands-on research linked to clinical trials activities at host institutions in sub-Saharan Africa. Christina’s project titled: “**Innate immunological mechanisms of control and factors driving inflammation in HIV controllers from a high incidence setting in**



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