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## MEDIA RELEASE

### University of Pretoria launches Pan African Cancer Research Institute

PRETORIA – The University of Pretoria (UP) has launched the Pan African Cancer Research Institute (PACRI) to transform the fight against cancer in Africa.

The launch, which was held as a two-day event at UP’s Future Africa Institute, featured various speakers, including international oncology experts, government officials, academics and representatives from non-governmental organisations.

“UP has made huge investments to support cancer research by investing in building PACRI’s state-of-the-art laboratories, which should be completed by the end of 2022,” said Vice-Chancellor and Principal of UP Professor Tawana Kupe. The University encourages transdisciplinary research to find solutions to local, national and global challenges. “Cancer is a dread disease that has a socioeconomic impact on society,” he added. “Cancer research is an area that is under-researched and needs more resources invested in it.” With collaborations and partnerships with other institutions, UP can make great strides in this area, he added.

“Although there are pockets of excellent cancer research in South Africa and the region, cancer researchers still believe in working in silos – even within the same institutions, basic scientists and clinicians work in silos,” said Founding Director of PACRI Professor Zodwa Dlamini, a Professor of Molecular Oncology at UP. Prof Dlamini is also Scientific Director of the South African Medical Research Council’s (SAMRC) Precision Oncology Research Unit and holds the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI)-National Research Foundation (NRF) SARChI Chair in Precision Oncology and Cancer Prevention. “The lack of human resources in the cutting-edge area of cancer research in the country is also a challenge,” she added.

Cancer rates continue to increase worldwide, and it is the second leading cause of death globally, with about 70% of cancer-related deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries. Cancer is also emerging as a major public health problem in sub-Saharan Africa. Prof Dlamini referred to a Globocan study that estimated that there were 19.3 million new cases of cancer and almost 10 million cancer-related deaths in 2020. “The disease is an important cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, in every world region, therefore reinforcing the need for a global escalation of efforts to control the disease.”

She also referred to a study titled ‘Cancer in Africa: the untold story’ which indicates that the disease has been given low priority in the research field and in healthcare services in Africa. According to scientists who undertook the study, “57% of all new cancer cases around the world occur in low-

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income countries, exacerbated by lack of awareness, lack of preventive strategies and increased life expectancies". Furthermore, Africa experiences a shortage of medical equipment, research resources and epidemiological expertise.

Efforts to build sustainable infrastructure for the dissemination of proven cancer prevention measures and the provision of cancer treatment are therefore critical for global cancer control.

This is where PACRI comes in. In its vision, the institute states that it aims to be a "world-class Pan-African research institute dedicated to pushing the boundaries of precision oncology and cancer prevention, and bringing new approaches for early diagnosis and novel therapeutic agents to improve health outcomes, reduce health inequalities and strengthen health systems in underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities".

Prof Dlamini explained that packages of effective and resource-sensitive preventative and curative interventions and their tailored integration into health planning nationally can reduce the future burden and suffering from cancer worldwide, while also narrowing cancer inequities or cancer health disparities.

Funded by UP, the SAMRC and the NRF, PACRI also intends to consolidate prevailing cancer research efforts and resources in order to provide a platform for research growth and development throughout South Africa and beyond. "This provides an opportunity to form multidisciplinary teams working under certain themes, which will tailor treatments to individual patients and therefore the provision of precision oncology treatment," according to the institute. "PACRI allows physicians to allocate research expertise more effectively, as well as identify multiple researchers who may be able to contribute to the understanding of precision oncology."

The institute will carry out its work on the basis of its slogan – Defeating Cancer Together – and has forged significant collaborations locally, nationally, in the region and abroad. It has created a Cancer Centre of Excellence, where surgeons, pathologists, oncologists and others work closely with basic scientists such as public health specialists, epidemiologists, computational biologists, biostatisticians and many others.

"We have a team of experts within the PACRI International Advisory Committee who work in the cutting-edge area of cancer research; they provide the skills required to help in building several future cancer researchers by co-supervising PACRI postgraduate students," said Prof Dlamini. "PACRI is a vehicle that enables cancer research that transcends disciplinary silos to create a genuine delivery continuum for cancer research, from bench to bedside and back again."

PACRI also brings together researchers who work in the fields of cell analysis and immunology, genomics, histopathology [the study of diseases of the tissue] and image analysis. "In the future, PACRI will complete the building of the bio-specimen core laboratory and the biostatistics core, as well as a pre-clinical research core dedicated to cancer research," said Prof Dlamini.

"As the largest health research organisation in Africa, the South African Medical Research Council is happy to be associated with the Pan African Cancer Research Institute in transforming the fight against cancer in Africa in line with PACRI's vision," said Prof Glenda Gray, President and CEO of the SAMRC. "The SAMRC's Precision Oncology Research Unit, Strategic Health Innovation Partnerships and Capacity Development Programme have provided and continue to provide PACRI with financial support to implement programmes that are in line with the SAMRC's vision."

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## About the University of Pretoria

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 114-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked top in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. The QS World University Rankings also placed UP among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and UP is in the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences), according to the Web of Science Essential Indicators.

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33,000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training.

For more information, go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)