



CAPRISA

CENTRE FOR THE AIDS PROGRAMME OF
RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Helpline: Woman of the year

In the rural valleys of Vulindlela near Howick there is an air of renewed hope. Liz Clarke spoke to Dr May Mashego-Mkhize, a member of the CAPRISA research team who was recently named as women of the year by Helpline.

Clinical research aimed at finding solutions to some of the most critical questions surrounding HIV/AIDS is one part of the unfolding story at

CAPRISA's investigative site at Vulindlela. The other is the emerging partnership of trust and support between the community and the research team.

Dr May Mashego-Mkhize, is an integral part of that burgeoning process, and believes that gaining the trust of young people through "honesty and friendship" is the key to "sound and meaningful" research.

This month her skills and experience in counselling young women on issues of HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, relationships and unwanted pregnancy, was honoured by the Domestic Violence Helpline organisation.

She was chosen as their Woman of the Year for her role in the fight against HIV/AIDS, an award that Mashego-Mkhize said came as a "very welcome" surprise.

At the Clinic in Vulindlela it's a role that has become an everyday reality as work continues to overcome stigma, silence and discrimination. But despite the complex challenges, there is an obvious camaraderie between researchers and clinic attendees.

"We are certainly dealing with life and death issues here," said Dr Mashego-Mkhize, "but as you can see there is a

sense of hope and warmth in this environment. It is so rewarding to see the support we are getting from the community."

Outside her office, one of a group of neat buildings that bound a sheltered meeting point where patients and participants can sit, relax and chat, a group of schoolgirls in neat uniforms were waiting for their appointment with Dr Mashego-Mkhize.

"It's taken time" she said, "but they now talk openly about sexual matters and are beginning to understand the importance of family planning and protecting themselves against disease.

"Young boys are also coming forward for advice – not enough, but it is a start."

Dr Mashego-Mkhize's role in Vulindlela is to assist with the microbicide preparedness programme for Phase II safety and efficacy trials of the candidate substance PRO 2000.

Six hundred HIV negative participants aged between 18 and 35 will be needed for the Phase II trials, which are due to begin within the next year.

As a parallel programme to the

microbicide study and CAPRISA's AIDS Treatment (CAT) project, Dr Mashego-Mkhize has begun work on establishing a "youth friendly" initiative at the Mafakani Clinic.

"The idea is to try and make a difference to the lives of young people from the age of 12, before they become sexually active. They must be confident to talk about any subject that concerns them, particularly about health and sexual activity. There is a huge need to build a feeling of self-worth amongst young people. They need to have a future to look forward to and the opportunity to gain skills. As an ethical part of the research process, these are the doors we have to open."



Dr May Mashego-Mkhize



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AI study gets underway in KZN



The Durban Acute Infection (AI) Team: Back row (left to right) Dr Koleka Mlisana, project director, Lindiwe Zama, counsellor, Mbonisi Hlohlo, research nurse, Dr Itua Iriogbe, clinician, Francois van Loggerenberg, study coordinator, Lucky Barnabas, community liaison officer, Nozipho Nhlabati, research nurse. Seated (left to right) Nosipho Ndlovu, counsellor, Yolisa Miya, nurse administrator, Lindiwe Mpanza, research nurse

What determines the set point in the HIV infection?

That is the key question that CAPRISA's AI team, under the leadership of Prof Williamson & Dr Mlisana, have set out to discover over the next 5½ years. This study has now been registered and enrollment has begun after a long period of protocol development and regulatory approvals.

Some of the answers are already known for HIV-1 Clade B, a dominant sub strain in many developed countries. Now it is critical to know what markers apply to HIV-1 Clade C, which is responsible for the major burden of disease in South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

"The research we are doing in conjunction with our collaborators, both nationally and internationally, will have

a significant impact on the development of vaccines," said the AI project director, Dr Koleka Mlisana. "If Clade C responds in the same clinical manner as Clade B then it brings us closer to a single vaccine."

Over the next few months the study will enrol 200 participants from high-risk groups who are HIV negative. The volunteers will be assessed at the AI clinic and the data precisely charted. If and when sero-conversion takes place, the viral process will be monitored closely to determine at what point and when viral stabilisation takes place.

"We need to know the factors that determine the set point, which we think may be different in each case," said Dr Mlisana

The study will continue to follow HIV negative participants for two years, but

the follow-up & treatment for those who become HIV positive, when needed will continue for up to 3½ years.

Ethical considerations are a top priority in the study. Confidentiality, said Dr Mlisana, is strictly adhered to. Volunteers are also given pre and post test counselling and information on disease risk reduction.

Although commercial sex workers make up the majority of the cohort, the AI liaison team will be looking for participants in other high risk groups, including high risk men.

Dr Mlisana said that the long-term plan was to understand how events during acute infection impacted on clinical illness later when patients are put onto ARV's.

As part of the Fogarty-Ellison fellowship programme for US students with a strong interest in international health or clinical research, CAPRISA is “home” to two of the recipients as well as a Fellow sponsored by Albert Einstein College. They will spend their fellowship year involved in several research projects.

Unique opportunity working in the field of HIV/AIDS and TB



DAVID EDWARDS: Durham University - Duke University. “I was doing research work in the Congo, stationed in Kinshasa when I came across the Fogarty Ellison training programme on the internet for students interested in international public health. It sounded very interesting, so I immediately applied.”

At the time of his application to the American-based programme David was working on his MPH thesis on paediatric TB and its strong links to HIV/AIDS.

“I was delighted that my posting was to KwaZulu-Natal because I will be able to continue with my interest in tuberculosis research. This opportunity could not have come at a better time for me.”

David will be working with the CAPRISA teams involved in the CAT and START programmes at the Communicable Disease Centre (CDC) Warwick Triangle clinical trial site in central Durban.

“I am very interested in the dual treatment regimens for TB and HIV/AIDS and following the research process.

He said that “this sort of opportunity” was something that you could not find in many parts of the world.”

David is hoping to complete his MPH this year and on his return to the US has one more year to complete of his medical studies.

When not involved in his research work, David is a keen footballer and is looking forward to joining a local soccer team - “even if it is just to keep fit.” He is also BMW motorbike enthusiast.

David will be based in Durban for his 12-month stay.

Meeting rural communities - “an unforgettable experience”



JENNY WALLDORF: Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York City. “What excites me is that I will be exposed to cutting-edge research into HIV/AIDS, something that you can never get at medical school. You don’t realise until you come to a country like yours the extent of the work being done. I know this is going to be a watershed year for me.”

Never having been to South Africa before, Jenny said that she had some pre-conceived ideas about what she expected.

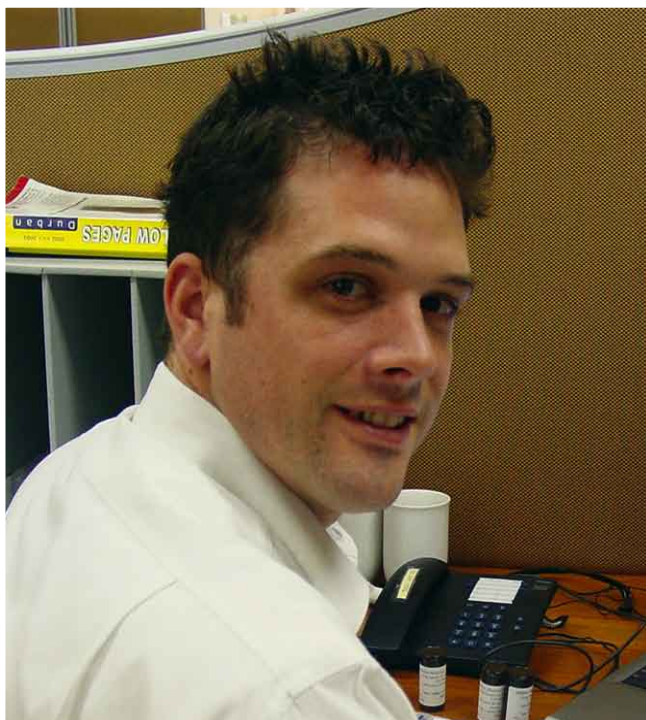
“The city life is much as I imagined it would be. But to visit the rural areas and meet communities and families in these outlying areas and try and understand their challenges from a social and health point of view, that is an unforgettable experience.”

Jenny was awarded a research fellowship by her university in the US to undertake a year’s research – the subject matter of her choice - in a foreign country.

“I chose South Africa because it is where major research is being conducted into HIV/AIDS. I believe that for young scientists this disease will remain the long-term challenge of the future, so best we learn as much as we can.

She said the CAPRISA training programme offered her a “unique opportunity” to understand the whole process of clinical research and how research protocols are translated into action into the various studies and initiatives”

Jenny has spent time as a student working as a public health volunteer in Cuba and is looking forward to “exploring” South Africa.



Finding a 'dramatic pathology'

DAN JOHNSON: Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana. "Nothing can quite prepare you for the 'dramatic pathology' that you find in South Africa. We hear about the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS during our medical studies, but only when you see the effects of the disease first-hand can you absorb the seriousness and the magnitude of the situation.

"In medicine you learn about the great plagues of history but this contemporary version is overwhelming in every possible way. Dan will spend the greater part of the year at CAPRISA's." Vulindlela clinical research site near Howick and will be involved in the CAT programme.

"I am really looking forward to being involved in this initiative and to the way the medico/ethical legal structure operates." Dan has completed his third year medical studies and at the same time is also studying for his MPH.

He said that once his studies were completed, he would like to follow a career in clinical research. "The experience that I will gain here will be invaluable." In his spare time Dan is looking forward to learn how to surf. He is also keen on cycling.

CIPRA - reaching an "exciting" stage

The Comprehensive International Programme of Research on AIDS (CIPRA) is now in its third year.

Coordinated through the International Research Branch at the Division of AIDS (DAIDS) at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), the CIPRA has funded twenty-nine grants, ranging from small planning and organizational grants, to larger single and multi-project research grants, in twenty-four different developing countries around the world.

"These grants allow for Investigators in these countries to develop research that is specific to the problems related to HIV/AIDS in their countries" said Dr. Rod Hoff, who leads the CIPRA team at DAIDS. "It also enables them to build research capacity and infrastructure development at the same time, all of which are critical in identifying better ways to prevent and treat AIDS.

"CIPRA is a programme that is cross-cutting at DAIDS, and relies on the necessary teamwork and expertise of many dedicated individuals from DAIDS, grants management, scientific review, as well as our outside collaborators in other NIH Institutes and the Westat contractors."



Dr Rod Hoff leads the CIPRA team

Hoff added, "It's very exciting to see these projects develop, especially now that studies are beginning to start on the ground."

Information on CIPRA Awards may be found at the following:
<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/daids/cipra/award-r03.htm>

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