

Scientists honoured with gold medals for research on HIV, TB

DAILY NEWS REPORTER

THE SA Medical Research Council (SAMRC) has awarded two Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI) faculty scientists gold medals for their seminal scientific contributions to the fields of HIV and tuberculosis (TB) research.

AHRI's Frank Tanser and Thumbi Ndung'u, who both hold professorships at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, were presented with the medals at the 2017 SAMRC Scientific Merit Awards gala dinner in Cape Town last night.

The awards are among South Africa's most prestigious. Gold medals are awarded annually to established senior scientists who have made key contributions that have had an impact on the health of people.

Ndung'u's research is focused on designing a vaccine or cure strategy for two of South Africa's major killer diseases, HIV and TB. He works to understand how the immune system fights off these diseases, and how these pathogens in turn evade or adapt to continuous immune pressure.

Ndung'u has made seminal contributions to the understanding of how the immune system is able to partially control HIV, demonstrating how genetic factors and viral factors interact to determine the clinical outcome of a patient.

He has also identified viral genetic factors that are linked to HIV transmission and how the disease progresses.

Ndung'u also has a special interest in capacity building for biomedical research in Africa,



THUMBI NDUNG'U

and heads the Sub-Saharan African Network for TB/HIV Research Excellence, which strives to empower African scientists.

"I am delighted to receive this award and recognition. In reality, this is an award not just for me but for my entire team. I am blessed to have had generous mentors, incredibly gifted colleagues and students that have made my research journey enjoyable and rewarding.

"Most of all, I have enjoyed unqualified and unwavering support from my family and friends who keep reminding me to laugh and smile more through life," said Ndung'u.

Tanser's research aims to evaluate and design intervention strategies to drive back the HIV epidemic and its negative consequences in communities hardest hit by the epidemic.

His pivotal work over the past 20 years has provided substantial insights into the evolving and dynamic nature of the HIV epidemic and its key drivers, informing HIV preven-



FRANK TANSER

tion and treatment efforts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Tanser's research into the population-level impacts of the antiretroviral therapy (ART) roll-out has led to wide-reaching and rapid changes to government policy on how ART programmes in South Africa are designed and implemented.

In particular, a seminal study he published in one of the world's leading scientific journals – *Science* – was the first to show that nurse-led and decentralised HIV programmes in rural areas could be successful in reducing HIV transmission at the population level.

"I am absolutely thrilled and deeply honoured to receive such a prestigious award and I accept it on behalf of my excellent team of researchers and collaborators.

"I also want to thank my wonderful family for their incredible support over the past 20 years. Without their unconditional support, none of this would have been possible," said Tanser.