

R40m NIH grant keeps HIV prevention as top priority in 2023

Frank Tanser, a leading scientist in HIV research based at Stellenbosch University, has been awarded a R40m grant over five years from the US National Institutes of Health to design future HIV-prevention strategies for severely affected rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa.



Source: Facebook. Frank Tanser, a leading South African scientist in the field of HIV, has joined the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) as director of population health innovation.

He receives this award in the capacity as director of population health innovation at the university's centre for epidemic response and innovation in the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking.

The research, entitled *The changing face of HIV in the era of Covid-19: Maximising HIV incidence reduction through dynamic targeting of current and future distributions of acquisition risk*, will be used to inform the future implementation of HIV prevention programmes.

Led by Stellenbosch University, the proposed research will involve scientists from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI), the University of Lincoln, the University of Heidelberg, the University of Washington, New York University, and the University of Cincinnati.

"We are extremely excited and honoured to have been awarded this grant from the NIH. Our HIV surveillance site in rural South Africa is one of the only settings in the world where we can measure dynamic changes in the burden of new HIV infections with a high degree of accuracy," says Tanser.

SA a leader in managing this epidemic

Kanshu Rajaratnam, head of the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking, adds: "I would like to congratulate the team for securing this prestigious NIH grant. The findings of this work will be vital for designing future HIV prevention efforts, and South Africa can play a leading role in showing the world how this epidemic can be driven to low levels."



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Although Tanser's recent research has shown that there has been a substantial reduction of 43% in new HIV infections in rural areas, events such as Covid-19 which disrupted HIV care could create shifts in the burden of unsuppressed viral load and new HIV infections.

On the other hand, the shift to Dolutegravir-based regimens (a new antiretroviral medication to control HIV infection) in 2020 will likely further decrease rates of HIV incidence, and the team expects the median age of acquisition of HIV infection will shift to increasingly older age-groups.

The HIV epidemic is rapidly changing and existing intervention strategies will therefore need to evolve to keep up with the

changing dynamics of the epidemic.

“We have a fantastic team in place and I’m confident that the findings from this work will allow us to take HIV-prevention strategies to the next level and ultimately to make a massive difference to local populations who are still at high risk of infection from this terrible disease,” Tanser concludes.

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