

SAMRC young scientist wins the L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science South African National Programme Young Talents Award

Dr Vundli Ramokolo, a Specialist Scientist and Post-Doctoral Researcher within the HIV Prevention Research Unit (HPRU) at the South African Medical Research Council, has been awarded a research grant to the tune of R160 000.00 by the Foundation L'Oréal.



The award, which is part of the Foundation's L'Oréal-UNESCO *For Women in Science*, aims to improve the representation of women in science by recognizing those who have contributed outstandingly to scientific gains.

Recognised for her groundbreaking research work on the factors that make some children, such as those who are affected by diseases such as HIV and those who live in impoverished settings, more vulnerable to poor health outcomes, Dr Ramokolo was among six exceptional young women scientists from South Africa who were selected from over 150 applicants by a jury of independent experts. Her study measures the impact of Child Support Grant (CSG) on child growth, taking into account antecedes such as maternal health in pregnancy, and factors such as household food security, infant feeding and young child practices.

Furthermore, the study assesses whether disparities in the early growth of HIV exposed uninfected children can still be observed in the first two years of life, and also explore the influence of maternal HIV and ARV status on longer-term growth and neurodevelopment.

This work is aligned with the WHO's Nurturing Care Framework for early childhood development that recognises that optimal child development requires interventions throughout the life course, including those that ensure that women have healthy pregnancies and safe deliveries, and that infants and toddlers receive optimal nutrition, nurturing and healthcare early to foster healthy growth and development.

"The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have widespread impact globally and we all had to adjust to the "new normal". Ultimately, science will provide solutions for many of the unprecedented challenges that the world is currently facing. This is why L'Oréal and UNESCO have been empowering young female scientists for 22 years, more than 3,400 researchers from 118 countries have been supported and recognised." explains Gilles Antoine, Country Manager of L'Oréal South Africa.

He adds that women in science have the power to change the world provided they are given the means and support.

Grateful for the recognition, Dr Ramokolo says this prestigious award is a testament to the importance of my scientific contribution and that it gives her the confidence to continue with her quest to improve lives through science.

“It is the much-needed financial support to carry-out my post-doctoral training and research activities, including a research stay at Columbia University to visit my postdoctoral professor. I will also use some of the funding for any training courses that I require, and for funding any research, publication, database development and maintenance costs.” said Ramokolo.

She concludes that this prestigious L’Oréal for Women in Science Programme is also a great platform to showcase her work and to network with other leading women in science. Born in Soweto and raised in Alexandra – the two townships which mirror much of the despairing reality of poverty in previously disadvantaged communities, she says this award will also give her the opportunity to encourage other aspiring young scientists, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, to pursue science.

Dr Ramokolo is a previous beneficiary of the SAMRC’s Bongani Mayosi National Health Scholars and Intra-mural Post-Doctoral Programmes that are administered by the organisation’s Division for Research Capacity Development.

Although she recently joined the HIV Prevention Research Unit, for many years she was with the Health Systems Research Unit including at the time of applying to the awards.