

From the SAMRC Intramural Postdoctoral Fellowship to the Professorship at Wits

“When a young scientist is promoted, there is new blood in the research community.” These are the words of Professor Janan Dietrich, who has completed 3 years of postdoctoral fellowship within the Health Systems Research Unit of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), and recently promoted to Associate Professor within the [School of Clinical Medicine](#) at the University of the Witwatersrand ([Wits](#)).



The promotion was presented through a virtual ceremony of the Faculty of Health Sciences, by the outgoing Dean, Professor Martin Velle in December of 2020.

Passionate about working with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, Prof Dietrich has, for the last fourteen years, been the lead social scientist at the [Perinatal HIV Research Unit](#), one of the SAMRC’s close associate organisations where she says she’s able to live her passion.

Her research journey in working with adolescents in one of the country’s biggest townships, Soweto, began more than a decade ago when she joined the SAMRC’s HIV Prevention Research Unit (PHRU) as a Social Scientist. In this capacity she led the Adolescent Community Advisory Board of the PHRU and started developing a robust youth engagement strategy. She also has extensive experience in developing adolescent-friendly services and tools, which she is presently implementing across all her work that is related to adolescents and young adults. This work is mainly focused on social science in the context of the bio-medical research field in HIV treatment and prevention. But that’s not all, Janan is also passionate about mobile health and is currently focusing on developing and testing different mobile phone technologies to deliver sexual behaviour and practice assessments among various key populations in South Africa.

As a beneficiary of the SAMRC’s Research Capacity Development Funding Programme, she says she first heard the amazing funding opportunity through a colleague and at the time her desire was to learn more in doing national large scale and national research with adolescent girls and young women with a specific desire to understand how psychosocial factors can be enhanced for adolescent girls and young women living with HIV. Because of working with young people, she became keen to explore how digital tools can be utilized for health promotion.

“Being the recipient of SAMRC RCD funding has opened so many doors for me – I am now an Associate Professor! The SAMRC award is quite prestigious and as a result I have been awarded a CIPHER Growing the Leaders Fellowship through the International AIDS Society as well as a virtual fellowship with the University of Edinburgh” said Janan.

Highlighting the importance of mentorship and protected time for career growth, she says the RCD Programme has provided her with excellent mentorship. “Professor Catherine Matthews, HSRU Director, afforded me protected time to focus on my first author publications. Being able to increase my first author publications contributed substantially to my promotion to Associate Professor” Janan said.

Current projects

Asked about her current research and its social impact, she says she is presently investigating the role of psychosocial resources with HIV knowledge and Antiretroviral therapy (ART) exposure in a representative household study of adolescent girls and young women living with HIV in six South African districts. “Young women are the centre of the HIV epidemic in South Africa. “Using my [CIPHER Fellowship](#), I am able to better understand how to ensure that the 90-90-90 goals are achieved for adolescent girls and young women living with HIV,” she adds.

Future endeavours

Born and raised on the Cape Flats and being the first one in her immediate and extended family to go to university, Janan says in many ways she was fortunate to have the privilege of a university education. “For many youths in places like Mitchell’s Plain, finishing school is not even an option and I would like to be able to “pay it forward” through mentorship programmes with high school learners who are from disadvantaged backgrounds like mine” she said.

In December last year, Janan worked with youth and [launched](#) #YouthkeStarring, an initiative to create an empowerment campaign tackling youth health and mental wellbeing through social media. [#YouthKeStarring](#) intends to address, not alleviate, the social determinants of health among the youth, and it is a platform to unify and amplify the voices of the youth.

This social health promotion campaign makes use of the [Ottawa Charter](#) action areas, namely: creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, and developing personal skills as part of the implementation plan. “As part of the campaign, there will be 12 monthly themes, each with the objective to inform, empower, engage and interact with the youth in fulfilment of the aspects identified by the World Health Organisation’s definition of health,” she said.

Largely, Janan attributes her success to her family – she says her husband and three boys are quite supportive of my ambitions as long as she watches her computer screen time. Another quirky reason for her success is that when she was younger, there were pathology labs headed by Dr Dietrich and partners. “I never knew this Dr Dietrich nor was I related to this person but seeing my own surname with the title Dr in front of it gave me such huge hope that I could have that title too”.

“Lastly, I have so many female mentors that contributed to my career growth and who have guided and supported me go outside of my comfort zone, in particular, Prof Glenda Gray who has been absolutely fabulous in my career growth – she taught me the value of giving freely without expectation and doing so has brought so many positive outcomes in my scientific career” concludes Janan.