

NeuroGap Psychosis Study

WITH ANNE STEVENSON
MSc Harvard

Programme Director for the NeuroGap Psychosis Study, Ms Anne Stevenson, from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and The Broad Institute (made up of MIT and Harvard), visited Nelson Mandela University, Faculty of Health Sciences to share experiences with young up and coming researchers and gain further insights into the NeuroGap study at Eastern Cape and SA sites. Ms Stevenson's work falls at the intersection of behavioural health and biomedical research, particularly in vulnerable populations. In addition, to NeuroGAP-Psychosis, Anne's past research focused on youth in post-conflict settings in East and West Africa, HIV-affected children in Rwanda, and women at high risk of HIV acquisition in Durban.



The Nelson Mandela University Faculty of Health Sciences

We had the honour to host Ms Stevenson at our Missionvale Campus on 22 February 2022. Ms Stevenson addressed staff and invited Healthcare Professionals, and provided feedback on the study. To date, the results of 33,000 specimens have been made available, and the research team is fast approaching the release of the last data. An invitation was extended to attendees interested in neuroscientific investigation to engage with the released data to conduct further study. It is believed that through sharing of data it could contribute to the 'genomic revolution' currently underway in Africa and build the capacity of aspiring neuropsychiatric geneticists and researchers. Due to Professor Zingela's association with this ground-breaking research study, Nelson Mandela University eagerly awaits the publication of articles expanding the causes of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in understudied African populations.

Neuropsychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorders account for a large proportion of the global burden of disease. In recent years, there have been significant advances in understanding the genetic architecture of these disorders, but studies focused exclusively on subjects of Northern European ancestry. Limitations in the availability of research and knowledge that is inclusive of populations of African descent have posed a challenge to our ability to further research the genetic risk of psychiatric disorders. The need to address these challenges gave rise to the collaboration in 2014 between Harvard, Makerere University in Uganda, Moi University College of Health Sciences in Kenya, the University of Cape Town, Walter Sisulu University, Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Kenya, and the KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme in Kenya.



This is the first neuropsychiatric genetics study with the largest human-subject population in Africa, as the study recruited 39,000 participants from Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda. To increase genetic diversity in under-represented populations in psychiatric research, with the ultimate goal being to gain a clearer understanding of the genetic basis of severe mental illness and break down their DNA code. The Faculty of Health Sciences is proud to report that the Executive Dean, Professor Zukiswa Zingela, has been part of this controlled study since its conceptualisation while still Head of Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, and later after joining Nelson Mandela University. This had yielded a number of joint publications co-authored by all the Principal Investigators at the different research sites.

