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8 **NEWS**

SA health workers getting deadly TB

Udani Samarasekera

UCT researchers have shown that health workers in South Africa are contracting extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB), the most serious form of the disease that is extremely difficult to treat.

This was the first report of this type of TB in health workers, said lead researcher Keertan Dheda, of UCT's department of medicine.

XDR-TB is resistant to the four main tuberculosis drugs.

"It's hundreds of times more expensive to treat. Treatment lasts at least two years and response to treatment in South Africa is generally poor," said Dheda.

He said only about 20 percent of patients responded favourably to treatment.

XDR-TB is an emerging and serious problem in South Africa that Dheda called "one of the biggest health threats" facing the country.

The new research shows that 10 out of 334 people diagnosed with XDR-TB in the Western and Eastern Cape between 1996 and 2008 were health-care workers. Most were nursing staff.

The results were published online in the journal *Tropical Medicine and International Health* yesterday.

UCT researcher Shahieda Adams, a co-author of the paper, recently announced the results of separate research which showed that health workers in KwaZulu-Natal were six times more likely to have drug-resistant TB than the general population. This was worrying because "health workers are already in short supply".

Adams urged the government to implement stringent infection control measures at all health facilities.

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