

MEDIA RELEASE

Date: Embargoed for release at 12h00 on Thursday 29th May 2014

HARRY OPPENHEIMER FELLOWSHIP AWARD –

Top scholar at the University of Cape Town receives the Oppenheimer Fellowship

The Board of the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust is pleased to announce the recipient of the prestigious Harry Oppenheimer Fellowship Award for 2013: **Professor Keertan Dheda** of the University of Cape Town. Dheda becomes the fourteenth recipient of the Award since its inception and the sixth from UCT.

The Harry Oppenheimer Fellowship Awards were initiated by the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust in 2001 to commemorate the Trust's founder and all he stood for, especially his efforts to support human and intellectual development, advance scholarship and encourage ideas. The Trust has a long tradition of investing in education and many beneficiaries have gone on to make important contributions to South African public life. The Fellowship builds on and expands this tradition and is the Trust's premier award with a monetary value of R1,5 million. It is a very special investment to encourage and acknowledge excellence in scholarship in all its forms. Candidates from all disciplines compete annually for the Award and it is granted to scholars of the highest calibre who are engaged in cutting-edge, internationally significant work that has particular application to the advancement of knowledge, teaching, research and development in South Africa.

Durban-born **Keertan Dheda is Professor of Respiratory Medicine and Head of the Division of Pulmonology at the University of Cape Town**. He has received several other prestigious awards including the MRC Gold Scientific Achievement Award and the 2010 International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease Scientific Award. Dheda has published over 145 peer-reviewed papers in international journals including three seminal papers in the leading global journal, *The Lancet*, and holds three patents related to new TB diagnostic or infection control technologies. He is involved in the activities of several international academic societies, serves as co-chair of the Latent TB Infection sub-group of the Stop TB Partnership and holds a Visiting Professor appointment at University College London.

One of his main research interests is the study of multi-drug resistant pulmonary infections including tuberculosis. TB is now the commonest cause of death in South Africa. Worryingly, easily treatable TB strains have been superseded by highly drug resistant strains (MDR-TB) and those that are virtually impossible to treat due to high-grade resistance (XDR-TB and TDR-TB, totally drug-resistant TB). Patients with these untreatable strains are being discharged back into their communities as they are therapeutically destitute.

The Award will enable Professor Dheda to study the epidemiology, transmission dynamics (spread), optimal diagnosis, and outcomes of these highly drug-resistant strains and one of the aims of the work is to design a user-friendly test to identify the super-spreaders of drug-resistant TB – the minority of patients who spread most of the disease.

Dheda commented "TB is out of control in this country, is a common killer, and has a substantial deleterious impact on our economy. Even worse, the spectre MDR-TB and virtually untreatable XDR-TB that is emerging is one of the gravest public health threats facing the African continent.

New approaches to diagnosis, treatment and interrupting spread are urgently required to minimise the devastating impact of this emerging scourge. The Oppenheimer Award could not come at a better time and is particularly welcome as it will facilitate research to improve the control of drug-resistant TB.”

Concluding the Award presentation, **Mr Nicky Oppenheimer**, the Chair of the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust, said “We are delighted to confer this honour on Professor Dheda and offer him the opportunity to advance this important work. This is an innovative project that seeks to address a real threat and contribute to improvements in public healthcare delivery and we wish him and his colleagues every success.”

For further information please contact:

Keertan Dheda
Department of Medicine, University of Cape Town
Phone 021 406 6509 / 084 557 7754

Clare Digby
Oppenheimer Memorial Trust
Phone 011 551 9502 / 082 901 2292