

New drug development to focus on the genetics of cervical cancer

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Dr Tsitsi Chituku

University of Huddersfield researcher Dr Tsitsi Chituku is taking part in a project that seeks to learn more about the genetic factors that make some women more susceptible to cervical cancer. It was a recent visit to Africa, to carry out a health screening project involving hundreds of women, which helped to shape the emphasis of her research.

A qualified medical practitioner, Dr Chituku last year embarked on a PhD in pharmacy, focussing on [cancer drug development](#). Now, under the supervision of Professor Roger Phillips, she has decided to concentrate on the genetics of cervical cancer.

"We hope to be able identify polymorphisms in certain genes that may make individuals more susceptible to cervical cancers. For these people, we can offer screening more regularly and detect signs of the disease earlier," she said.

The direction now taken by Dr Chituku's research, encouraged by Professor Phillips, is a direct response to her experiences in December 2014, when she and a GP friend, Dr Fadzai Kanyangarara, decided to return to their native Zimbabwe in order to carry out a cervical cancer screening programme in Karoi, which is Dr Chituku's hometown. The goal was to spread awareness of health issues and to help empower local women.

They received funding to cover travel and transport costs via the International Humanitarian Award scheme run by the British Medical Association. A number of pharmacy and medical supply companies donated equipment and a large team of helpers was assembled at Karoi's general hospital. They used a simple and cheap but effective technique known as visual inspection with acetic acid – widely deployed in Africa – and the two UK-based doctors were "overwhelmed" by the response, said Dr Chituku.

Early detection

The team tested some 300 women, but awareness of the two-day programme rapidly spread, meaning that even after it had been completed there were still several hundred who wanted to take part. Now the two doctors hope to secure the backing for a repeat project in

Zimbabwe, switching the emphasis to rural areas, where there is currently no access to testing facilities.

Cervical cancer has been increasing in Africa, said Dr Chituku, and one theory is that women have a greater pre-disposition to the disease because of the prevalence of the HPV and HIV viruses in parts of the continent.

Now back in the UK, Dr Chituku is immersed in her research that could lead to earlier and more effective detection and treatment of [cervical cancer](#). She obtained her first degree, in bio-chemistry, in her native Zimbabwe, before relocating to the UK for her training in medicine at Warwick Medical School. A trainee surgeon, she has practiced in Coventry and, most recently Huddersfield, before switching to pharmacy research at the town's University.

Provided by University of Huddersfield

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