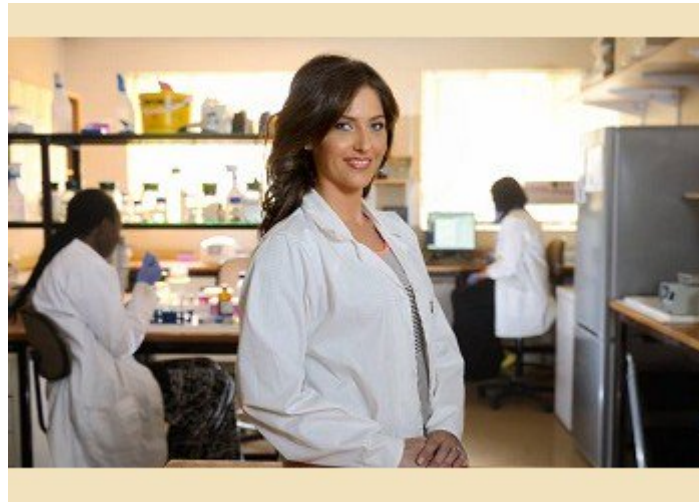


First ever SARChI NRF Chair awarded to Faculty of Veterinary Science

24 May 2018



Prof Celia Abolnik

A SARChI Research Chair has been awarded to Prof Celia Abolnik of the Faculty of Veterinary Science. This is the first Chair relevant to veterinary science to be awarded in the history of the Faculty.

Prof Abolnik is the current incumbent of the South African Poultry Association's Research Chair in Poultry Health and Production in the Faculty of Veterinary Science. The new South African Research Chair Initiative (SARChI) Research Chair, awarded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in December 2017, and recently endorsed, is designed to strengthen research and innovation capacity in the area of poultry health and production.

The Chair has a term of up to 15 years, renewable every five years subject to an in-depth review. The submission process for the Chair included an extensive international peer review process, and 26 international and local projects were identified within the scope of the application.

Poultry meat and egg production provides the second (broilers) and fourth (layers) most important source of animal protein to mankind on a global scale. Locally, poultry meat is produced and consumed more than all other meat types combined, while eggs are the fourth-biggest source of animal protein. These commodities are produced in similar ways all over the world but need local adaptations to be as successful as the best producers in the world. Additionally, the aspects of disease and nutrition have particular local components. Without local expertise it is not possible to produce to an international level of competitiveness. Poultry health and production expertise contributes to the South African economy via various routes. Researchers trained in poultry health and production focus on the development of new local and global knowledge through scientific endeavour and analysis, thus ensuring that national food security and human health are improved.

The Chair will be expected to develop, conduct, promote and disseminate research in the areas of diseases and other health and production-management issues of importance to the poultry industry, including issues emanating from associated avian industries in Southern Africa. Under Prof Abolnik's experienced and skilled leadership, the initial five-year research programme will focus on seven priority research areas based on their importance to the South African poultry industry. These areas were ascertained through consultation with industry stakeholders, government and academia, which has been taking place since 2012. The seven research areas, each with its own proposed projects, are: highly pathogenic avian influenza, respiratory diseases, immunosuppressive diseases, veterinary public health, pathogen genomics and metagenomics, vaccines and diagnostics, and nutrition genetics and management.

According to Prof Abolnik, the demand for animal protein, particularly poultry meat and eggs, is increasing in Africa. Therefore, finding novel approaches to detecting and preventing diseases in flocks – both large and small – will be critical to the sustainability of food production on the continent. 'This is no small task as pathogens evolve and adapt constantly, and move freely, but the research prospects are exciting and I'm grateful for the opportunity to continue the work we started in 2012,' she says.

The SARChI was established in 2006 by the DST. This funding instrument is managed by the NRF through a contractual agreement with the DST. SARChI is designed to significantly expand the scientific research base of South Africa in a way that supports implementation of the national Research and Development Policies.

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