UP part of 3-year ELEPHANT project to address health challenges arising from human, animal interaction such as COVID-19

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The partner representatives at the February kick-off meeting for project ELEPHANT.

The Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the leading partners in the Erasmus+ ELEPHANT project which will boost the capacity of the participating partner institutions in solving complex issues relating to the health of humans and animals.

The ELEPHANT (**E**mpowering universities' **L**earning and r**E**search ca**P**acities in the one **H**ealth **A**pproach for the ma**N**agement of animals at the wildlife, livestock and human interface in Sou**T**h Africa) project is a result of funding that was awarded to a consortium of eight higher education institutions (HEIs), including UP. Through the project, the institutions will receive a series of workshops and training opportunities that address core skills related to the One Health approach.

UP academic and a member of the ELEPHANT project steering committee Professor Anita Michel explained One Health as an approach that recognises that the health of humans and animals as well as the environment is connected.

"The One Health (OH) approach recognises that the health and wellbeing of people cannot be adequately secured and harnessed if we focus our health interventions on people only. The OH approach takes into full consideration that the many ways in which people, animals (both domestic and wild) and the environment we live in continuously interact with each other, directly or indirectly, can have very serious negative effects for any of us – be it people, animals or the environment. In short, this means that people can only be healthy if they live in a healthy environment (e.g. air and water free from pollutants) and are surrounded by healthy animals (e.g. for food or companionship).

“The aim of the OH approach is to find the best possible approach to address and solve complex health problems, (i.e. diseases in people which come from animals) by uniting the expertise from specialists in the human health sector, in animal health and in the environmental sciences. Collaboration and common goals between those that are responsible for maintaining the health of people on the one side, for animal health and environmental affairs on the other sides is the crux of making One Health work,” Prof Michel said.

With the coronavirus COVID-19 as an example of diseases that can have a devastating impact on human health, Prof Michel added that it is becoming increasingly important to have projects such as this.

“As a matter of fact, many of the diseases causing illnesses in people are also affecting specific animal species and these so-called zoonotic diseases can be transmitted from animals to humans in some cases by direct contact or otherwise via food, water and other ways. Animals serve many different purposes in the lives of people. People have direct contact with a wide range of animals as part of their daily work (e.g. farmers, farm workers, butchers, animal health practitioners, etc.) or for recreational purposes (companion animals, horse riding, etc.). To prevent any zoonotic diseases from our domestic animals it is very important to keep those animals healthy and free from diseases.

“Wild animals can harbour infections which are life threatening to people but not to themselves. As they normally live far away from and do not get into close contact with people, there is no risk for people to contract these diseases. If, however, people encroach into wildlife habitats to utilise those habitats for agriculture, logging or to capture wild animals for human consumption we see outbreaks of deadly diseases such as Ebola and the new coronavirus,” she said.

The project will run for three years, 2020-2022, and will benefit the research staff and postgraduate students involved by providing them with various training and networking opportunities.

“Five of the six South African HEIs recruit their students primarily from previously disadvantaged communities and project ELEPHANT offers a particularly important opportunity to these HEIs to embark on and embrace the One Health approach in their learning and research. The One Health-related research activities which are promoted by project ELEPHANT are seeking to improve the management of animals at the wildlife/livestock/human interface by involving the relevant local communities, making them project beneficiaries. The former National Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries as well as the Department of Science and Technology, amongst others, officially support project ELEPHANT as 'associate partners' based on the benefit of the project on their mandate,” Prof Michel explained.

The other HEIs involved in the ELEPHANT Project include: Utrecht University in the Netherlands and the University of Bologna in Italy, the University of Venda, University of Limpopo, University of Mpumalanga, University of Fort Hare and the Southern African Wildlife College. The consortium is led by the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University.

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