

SAMRC-Supported Scientists Honoured at 2025 SAWISA Awards

The South African Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) Mid-Career Scientist Programme has once again demonstrated its pivotal role in nurturing scientific excellence, with two of its beneficiaries receiving top honours at the 2025 South African Women in Science Awards (SAWISA).

Hosted annually by the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), the SAWISA awards celebrate the contributions of women to science, innovation, and public engagement in South Africa. This year, Prof. Zilungile Mkhize-Kwitshana and Prof. Alison September, both beneficiaries of the SAMRC's Mid-Career Scientist Programme, were recognised for their outstanding achievements, showcasing the impact of SAMRC's Research Capacity Development (RCD) grant programmes.

Prof. Zilungile Mkhize-Kwitshana: A Year of Accolades

Prof. Mkhize-Kwitshana, Professor of Immunology at the University of South Africa (Unisa), won the SAWISA prize in the Public Engagement with Research category. This honour crowns an exceptional year of recognition, which she attributes to strong support from the SAMRC's RCD unit.

Her 2025 awards include:

- One of the inaugural winners of the SAMRC Scientific Merit Award for Research Capacity Development and Transformation
- Pan African Cancer Research Institute's (PACRI) International Meeting Advancement Excellence Award
- Medical Laboratory Sciences Excellence Award
- SAWISA Award for Public Engagement with Research

Prof. Mkhize-Kwitshana's research focuses on the immunology of co-infections, particularly how neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) shape immune responses to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Tuberculosis (TB), Human Papillomavirus (HPV), and cancer. She has also advanced our understanding of the links between nutrition, immunity, and infection.

Her SAMRC-funded project on helminths, the microbiome, and co-infections has produced a substantial body of work, including 25 peer-reviewed journal articles and three book chapters over the past four years.

A passionate mentor, she continues to invest in training the next generation of scientists. Earlier this month, her PhD student, Roxanne Pillay, a staff member at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) supported through SAMRC's Research Capacity Development Initiative, won the Best Poster Presentation Award at an international conference in Bangkok — a testament to Prof Mkhize-Kwitshana's guidance and commitment to capacity building.



Prof. Alison September: A Global Impact

Prof. Alison September, Professor of Physiological Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT), was a finalist in the Natural and Engineering Sciences and Public Engagement with Research categories at SAWISA 2025.



Her research focuses on the genetics of musculoskeletal injuries, particularly those involving the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and she is an internationally respected leader in sports and exercise genomics.

She was recently appointed Deputy Director of UCT's Health through Physical Activity, Lifestyle and Sport (HPALS) Research Centre, which is ranked 25th globally in sport science. Prof. September's achievements this year extend well beyond national recognition. In a historic milestone, she is the only African scientist elected to the prestigious U.S. National Academy of Kinesiology (NAK)—joining an elite group that includes Nobel laureates and globally renowned scholars.

She also co-leads key initiatives such as the UK-South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Doctoral Training Programme and the Writing for International Research Excellence for Early Career academics in South Africa initiative, collaborating with historically disadvantaged universities to build research capacity and address inequalities, notably through collaboration.

Driving Health Research, Human Capacity Building, Excellence and Transformation

The recognition of Professors Mkhize-Kwitshana and September highlights the SAMRC's commitment to capacity development, transformation, and global scientific leadership. Through its Mid-Career Scientist Programme, the RCD division equips South African researchers to make meaningful contributions while inspiring and mentoring the next generation of health scientists.

Congratulating the awardees, Dr Michelle Mulder, the Executive Director of GIPD and Line executive of RCD, emphasised: "These achievements demonstrate not only the vital role of women in advancing South Africa's health research and innovation agenda, but also the transformative impact of the SAMRC's investment in "human capacity development for health research ".

Commenting on the achievements, Dr Abeda Dawood, RCD Divisional Manager, stated that "these awards are a reflection of the main purpose of the SAMRC Mid-career Scientist Programme, which is to invest in promising mid-career scientists to facilitate their retention in the public sector in areas of strategic interest to both the National Department of Health (NDoH) and the SAMRC".

The SAMRC Mid-career Scientist Programme equips mid-career scientists in their affiliated institutions to write successful grant proposals for their funded research and to expand their research teams by mentoring postgraduate students and hosting postdoctoral fellows. The stature of the funded principal investigator must demonstrate growth that cannot be achieved without the Mid-Career Scientist Grant.

[For more details on the SAMRC Mid-Career Scientist Programme](#)