

De Oliveira makes it to Time's top 100 influencers in global health

By Tamar Kahn

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Time magazine has named Stellenbosch University virus hunter Tulio de Oliveira as one of the 100 most influential individuals in global health, honouring his work on the genomics of infectious diseases for the second time in as many years.

De Oliveira shot to global prominence during the coronavirus pandemic, when he led a team of scientists that confirmed the emergence of the Omicron variant of SARS-Cov-2, which rapidly became the dominant global form of the virus. He was also at the forefront of the earlier discovery of the Beta variant.

In 2022 he made it onto the magazine's Time100 list, and he is now on its inaugural Time100 health list too. The list includes scientists, doctors, advocates, educators, communicators and policymakers.

"Together they are a reminder that many things are going right, and their work is enough to inspire the belief that the world of health is in the middle of a golden age of accomplishment and transformation," said Time magazine.

De Oliveira said he was deeply honoured to be recognised again by Time Magazine.

"This acknowledgment underscores the importance of collaborative research efforts in addressing global health challenges, he said.

"Once I saw that the Covid-19 pandemic was receding, I decided to work with our team of over 100 scientists in SA and with the largest genomics facility in the world, the Wellcome Sanger Institute, to create a new programme of work, this time to fight the

multiple diseases that are being amplified by climate change, such as dengue, chikungunya, the Zika virus, influenza and cholera,” he said.

De Oliveira previously established the KwaZulu-Natal Research Innovation and Sequencing Platform and the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation at the University of Stellenbosch, which conduct cutting-edge genetic sequencing and analysis of pathogens.

His work was rapidly establishing SA as a scientific hub for virus hunting, Time said.

Other people recognised by Time for their influence on global health include a group of scientists — Dan Drucker, Joel Habener, Jens Juul Holst and Svetlana Mojsov — whose work led to the discovery of a new class of GLP-1 diabetes and weight-loss drugs such as Ozempic; Katalin Kariko and Drew Weissman whose work on RNA paved the way for the development years later of mRNA Covid-19 vaccines; and Charles Gore for his work in expanding access to cheap generic medicines with the Medicines Patent Pool.

Also on the list are French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron for enshrining the right to abortion in the French constitution, Bashar Murad for leading the Palestine Red Crescent Society’s efforts to provide medical and relief services to people in war-torn Gaza, former US president Jimmy Carter, for his campaign to eradicate guinea worm, and actor Halle Berry for her advocacy for better menopause research and treatment.

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