



From the Director's Desk – Dr Kobus Herbst

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Welcome to the inaugural edition of *The SAPRIN Connection*. We have created this newsletter to add to our information sharing across the nodes and beyond. It will cover a diverse range of issues within the nodes.

2024 is a significant year for South Africans, as it marks 30 years of freedom and democracy. During the new dispensation, we have seen important strides made in the public health sector. As we take stock of our progress, we need to be mindful of the challenges that still face us.

Equitable access to healthcare is an area that we have grappled with as a country. Now, we are closer to rolling out universal health care in the form of National Health Insurance (NHI). South Africa, like

many countries has not been immune to climate events. Climate change and its impact on health is something that is gaining more prominence on health agendas.

This year SAPRIN celebrates its seventh year of existence as a national research infrastructure funded by the Department of Science and Innovation and hosted by the SAMRC. We have made considerable headway in establishing ourselves. We consist of six HDSS nodes, three rural and three urban – Agincourt (Mpumalanga), DIMAMO (Limpopo), AHRI (KwaZulu-Natal, uMkhanyakude), GRT-INSPIRED (Gauteng), C-SHARP (Western Cape) and USINGA (KwaZulu-Natal, eThekweni).

Our efforts to expand our footprint and work towards a more robust research network will see a seventh HDSS node coming on board in 2024. Applications closed on 2 April and the evaluation and subsequent appointment process will now begin in earnest. We are excited at the prospect of a new node.

Later this year we commence our strategic planning for the period 2025 – 2030. Now that SAPRIN's foundation has been set, we proceed to the next phase of developing the scientific agenda and facilitating access to SAPRIN as a national research infrastructure. People are at the core of our work, so we intend to define and enhance our stakeholder relations, strengthen governance, quality assurance structures and community engagement.

We are also happy to announce that SAPRIN will contribute to the next phase of the Health and Ageing in Africa: Longitudinal Studies in South Africa (HAALSA). Phase two commenced in June 2023 and seeks to build on ten years of HAALSA work at Agincourt. As a national research infrastructure, SAPRIN is an ideal platform for piloting the national HAALSA survey on healthy ageing and cognitive wellbeing.



I would like to congratulate Professor Stephen Tollman of Agincourt on receiving a Gold Medal at the recent South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) Scientific Merit Awards. This is another feather in his cap, shortly after being awarded the prestigious Alumni Award of Merit from the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health in 2023.

As part of our efforts to develop and mentor the next generation of scientists, we introduced the Nodal Research PhD Fellowship last year. The fellowship uses a model where the Principal Investigator is the main applicant supervising the doctoral fellow. The first award went to Professor Eric Maimela from DIMAMO who is supervising PhD student Kagiso Seakamela. We are currently evaluating applications for the second PhD Fellowship.

This newsletter also gives you a glimpse into some of the finer workings that happen inside the node, such as community outreach and the people behind the nodes. It brings to light some of the challenges that are encountered such as difficult terrain and inclement weather.

We wish you happy reading and look forward to an eventful year for SAPRIN and our nodes.

Dr Kobus Herbst

SAPRIN Director