

UCT alum helps UK navigate its way to good health

As an undergraduate BA student on her way to write an English exam in what is now the Sarah Baartman Hall, Jeanelle De Gruchy paused on the hall's granite steps and looked back at the Cape Flats. A huge black cloud was growing above Crossroads where police and security forces were clashing with residents during the apartheid government's brutal State of Emergency in the mid-1980s.

The incongruity of writing an exam on one of Shakespeare's works, while another community was fighting for their rights, proved a seminal moment for De Gruchy. As much as she was enjoying her studies in English and History, she came to the realisation that she needed to focus on learning skills of a more practical nature, skills that would enable her to play more active role in the community. So, after completing her BA, she enrolled in medicine.

After graduating from medical school in 1993, De Gruchy started her internship in East London's Cecilia Makiwane Hospital just before South Africa held its first democratic election. Having first worked in hospitals as a student and intern, followed by a stint as Senior House Officer at the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town, she witnessed first-hand the negative effects apartheid policies had wrought on people's health. After working as a doctor in the UK for a period in the 1990s, she gained an even greater understanding of how global structural and systemic factors compromise poorer people's health. However, these insights it also ignited her interest in public health and a passion for creating and implementing policy that impacts positively on people's health.



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STELLAR CAREER

Now almost three decades after graduating from UCT and following a stellar career in public health in the United Kingdom, predominantly at a local level, De Gruchy was recently appointed as Deputy Chief Medical Officer (DCMO) for England – one of the nation's top public health positions.

Working alongside Jonathan Marron, Director General of the Department of Health and Social Care, she is responsible for co-leading a newly created agency, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) within the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). Together they report to the Chief Medical Officer of England, Professor Chris Whitty.

Her DCMO role is to advise the government on clinical and public health matters; her OHID brief is to focus attention on behaviours having a detrimental effect on health, such as alcohol abuse, tobacco use, junk food and other life-style behaviours or factors that lead to the development of non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes.

REDUCING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

"How we reduce health inequalities and create a healthier nation, is really the longer-term role of the new office. It's a new opportunity for providing leadership and creating a new entity to really bring about some lasting changes," said De Gruchy. She explained that the office works in an intersectional way to improve access to public health services throughout the country, and to develop health policy with other government departments so that the drivers of good health are addressed. These departments include employment, housing, education and the environment.

"It's an amazing opportunity to create a strong office that integrates public health expertise with civil service expertise. We've brought together public health expertise – national and regional, and our strong relationships with local Directors of Public Health – with the ability to navigate national government and work closely with national politicians, and that's what's new and exciting."

Reminiscing about her time at UCT De Gruchy feels extremely fortunate to have been able to engage with remarkable staff and students whom she describes as being of "an incredible calibre". De Gruchy is proud of her association with UCT and of her familial links with the university. As the daughter of distinguished theologian and anti-apartheid activist, Emeritus Professor John de Gruchy, she was already familiar with both the atmosphere on campus and

the ideology of resistance before registering as a student. She noted that while her father and mother were both champions of social justice, they were just two of a courageous, remarkable community that included Rondebosch United Church congregants who not only rejected apartheid, but were trying to do something about it.

CHAMPIONING HUMAN RIGHTS

For De Gruchy at that time, this way of being in the world – speaking out against an oppressive government and always doing one's utmost to champion human rights – was exemplified by her older brother, Steve De Gruchy. An outspoken opponent of apartheid and a conscientious objector, Steve served on the UCT SRC and, like De Gruchy, was a member of the Student Union for Christian Action, an organisation that also campaigned against apartheid. De Gruchy says she always looked

up to her brother, not only for the principled stance he took against the apartheid regime, but for putting in the hard work to actively challenge it. Following in his father's footsteps, Steve went on to become an influential theologian and highly regarded academic in his own right. Tragically he drowned in a river tubing accident in 2010 at the relatively young age of 48, but he remains a daily inspiration to De Gruchy and motivates her to work hard and always to give of her best.

These qualities have supported her in her bid to make a real difference in improving the health of her adopted nation. She also brings to her new roles the profound insights gained during her time in various local leadership positions in the UK public health sphere. These include serving as President of the UK Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) for four years, the Director of Population Health at Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and Chair of the Greater



In 1993 Jeanelle de Gruchy was awarded her MBChB and was capped by her father, Professor John de Gruchy, at the Health Sciences graduation.



*Jeanelle de Gruchy returned to South Africa for a couple of years in the late 1990s as a Research Fellow with the Health and Human Rights Project – a joint project of UCT and the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture. De Gruchy was pictured with her co-editors, (centre) Prof Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven (now at Wits) and UCT’s Prof Leslie London (far right) at their book launch: *An Ambulance of the Wrong Colour: Health Professionals, Human Rights and Ethics in South Africa*. Judge Richard Goldstone (far left) and Dr Mamphela Ramphele (second from right) were there to congratulate them.*

Manchester Association of Directors of Public Health. Prior to these roles she was Director of Public Health at the London Borough of Haringey from 2010 to 2018, and Chair of the London Association of Directors of Public Health.

ADVENT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

“At the start of the Covid pandemic national government and national civil service, perhaps did not fully harness the importance of local knowledge, local experience, and local understanding to inform national policy; and that policy needs to be co-designed with those who understand what’s happening on the ground.” Consequently, around August 2020, the political decision was made to disband Public Health England and create two new bodies: the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), which De Gruchy now co-leads. UKHSA is the main body who will continue to respond to

Covid and other health protection issues, with OHID having the mandate of tackling post-COVID recovery, health improvement and health inequalities.

De Gruchy believes she is uniquely placed to bring to the new office a good grasp of local public health, and an understanding, nationally, of the benefits gained by dovetailing local policies and systems with those at the national level.

CREATING BETTER HEALTH POLICIES

“I’m hoping to bring that local thinking and that national understanding into all health policy areas. That’s why I’m excited about having this particular role as I have the opportunity to do just that and therefore we can create better health policy.”

“That’s where my skills, my passion, my ambition lies, it is all about how to create healthy nations. That’s, that’s what it is really. And how do you tackle inequalities?”

She uses the example of how

Covid further exposed the inequalities experienced in the UK predominantly by people from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. Many people in these groups were hit much harder by Covid than their white compatriots in terms of both case numbers, and illness severity.

“Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities died in greater proportions in the first and second waves, and there was a tendency to look for genetic reasons. But actually the reasons are much more structural. COVID really affected those people who had frontline front-facing jobs, couldn’t work from home, were reliant on public transport, lived in poorer housing and in crowded homes with no garden spaces.”

“While health inequality is the consequence of that wider structural inequality, there are still lots of things you can do to improve health,” De Gruchy said, adding that getting to grips with the root causes is where the more profound work of the new office lies.