

# DIVISION OF LIPIDOLOGY

Quietly blazing a trail in lipidology



Doctor Dirk Blom  
Head of  
Lipidology

Although small in terms of physical size and staff component, the Division of Lipidology is achieving big things in clinical drug trials, making quite a name for itself nationally and internationally.

“The Lipid Unit is very small and only has a single consultant,” says division head, Doctor Dirk Blom. “Nursing management has progressively withdrawn nursing support from the unit. The lipid unit has no registrars or interns and there is also no dedicated clerical support for the unit. It has to rely on volunteers, who often only stay for short periods of time.”

Yet despite these obstacles, the Lipid Unit has done phenomenally well. Doctor Blom says, “The unit remains at the forefront of drug development research in the field of lipidology and is particularly recognised for the work done in the fields of familial hypercholesterolaemia (both heterozygous and homozygous familial hypercholesterolaemia).”

“To my knowledge, the unit is one of very few in the world to have participated in clinical trials of three novel



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*Bharati Ratanjee performing carotid ultrasound examination.*

agents for the management of homozygous familial hypercholesterolaemia (lomitapide, mipomersen and evolocumab)."

Lipidology services and research at UCT date back more than five decades and have grown over the last few years. The unit provides carotid ultrasound services (assessment of carotid intima media thickness and screening for carotid stenosis) to patients and does screenings for suspected genetic hyperlipidaemia.

The unit also provides input at multiple medical education events throughout the country and internationally at a generalist and specialist level.

"The unit is very active in clinical drug development studies and participates in eight to 12 international protocols at any given time. The administrative load associated with conducting clinical trials is substantial," says Doctor Blom, who is also on the UCT Human Research Ethics Committee and the secretary of the College

of Physicians. While excited by the research the division does – and its potential to dramatically improve outcomes in patients with severe genetic dyslipidaemia – Doctor Blom says that raising sufficient funds to run the unit remains a constant challenge. In future, he would like to secure the long-term financial viability of the unit and to recruit additional staff, as well as to spread awareness about the dangers of certain conditions.

"Familial hypercholesterolaemia (FH) remains underdiagnosed and undertreated in most of the world, and South Africa is no exception. Early identification and treatment of FH saves lives. South Africa should establish a formal FH registry and cascade screening programme to identify patients with FH and ensure that they are treated appropriately. Such programmes have been very successful in several countries, with the Netherlands leading the way in this field."