

# COVID-19 incorporated into MUT's Environmental Health curriculum

With COVID-19 having much to do with the environment and how people behave, MUT's Department of Environmental Health has decided to fully incorporate the topic into its academic programmes. The curriculum will be more dynamic, according to Anna Bigara, a lecturer in the department, and the department may also focus on strengthening and integrating the principles of epidemiology and of risk analysis and management throughout its various modules.



Left: Anna Bigara, Lecturer in the department, and Dr Thobile Poswa, HOD

This is one of the department's reactions to COVID-19, a pandemic that is wreaking havoc across the globe. "In early March 2020, we recognised that the soon-to-be pandemic would affect our country. In the Epidemiology (study of diseases) module, I integrated COVID-19 into the sections on communicable diseases, outbreak response and infection control," said Bigara, adding that they were now going to use case studies to enhance critical thinking.

She is already applying current interventions such as the International Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programme in water quality management. "But now the emphasis is on how it should be strictly applied and maintained because these provide an important additional barrier to COVID-19 transmission and to the transmission of infectious diseases in general," she said.

The department is guided by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of environmental

health, which is the science and practice of preventing human illnesses and injury, promoting well-being by identifying and evaluating environmental sources and hazardous agents such as COVID-19 as a biohazard, and limiting exposures to hazardous biological, chemical and physical agents in air, water, soil, food and other environmental media or settings that may adversely affect human health.

Bigara applauded the government for taking a bold step to contain the pandemic, and had some advice. "The nation-wide lockdown was necessary to disrupt the chain of transmission and prevent the spread of the virus while the health care system prepared the hospitals and other related places for possible COVID-19 cases," she said. She added that in hindsight, authorities could have focused earlier on prevention measures related to cluster infections in high-risk areas within communities, and particularly among vulnerable people, as opposed to the initial approach of identifying cases and tracing the contacts.