

# SU researchers take part in natural killer cells TB study

Professor Gerhard Walzl and Dr Stephanus Malherbe of the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence for Biomedical Tuberculosis Research at Stellenbosch University Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, were part of an [international research project](#), which explored the role of so-called natural killer cells in the development of active TB infection.



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Natural killer (NK) cells are part of the human immune system. They are naturally-occurring white blood cells that can kill certain bacteria, viruses and other disease-causing organisms, often by destroying human cells that have been infected or damaged by these pathogens.

For the study, scientists compared levels of NK cells in people with no TB infection, people with latent TB infection (healthy patients with infection but no symptoms), and people with active TB infection (ill patients with symptoms).

They discovered higher levels of NK cells in people with latent TB, while people with active TB had lower levels of the cells. Levels of NK cells increased when patients started treatment and recovered from the disease. The finding suggests that NK cells may play a protective role in the context of TB infection.

In addition, the measurement of NK cells show promise as a gauge to determine the severity of TB infection and to track disease progression and treatment. How the research was conducted is also noteworthy. It involved the analysis of complex data obtained from three separate clinical studies through data sharing agreements. This is an example of a recent trend

among institutions and funders to promote data sharing to optimise research findings.

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