

MAVERICK CITIZEN

TRIBUTES POUR IN

Politicians, civil society bid farewell to health activist and Struggle stalwart Hoosen ‘Jerry’ Coovadia



Professor Hoosen ‘Jerry’ Coovadia. (Photo: Flickr / IAPB / VISION 2020)



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Anti-apartheid veteran, prolific scientist and champion for health equity in South Africa, Professor Hoosen ‘Jerry’ Coovadia, has died. Tributes paying

homage to Coovadia's incredible life, dedication to equality and impeccable legacy are pouring in. Daily Maverick looks at how he is being remembered across South Africa.

The death of renowned activist and academic Professor Hoosen Jerry Coovadia has left a hole in the medical community and South Africa as a whole. Coovadia, affectionately referred to as Jerry by many, died at his home in Durban on Wednesday, 4 October 2023, at the age of 83.

Having dedicated his life to medical equity and the struggle for liberation and human rights, messages of condolence and tributes have been pouring in, honouring his remarkable legacy.

A champion against HIV/Aids denialism

Activist and co-founder of the [Treatment Action Campaign](#) (TAC) Zackie Achmat remembers Coovadia as “one of the most decent and kind human beings” he ever met. Achmat paid homage to how Coovadia's activism helped build and lead a local and international movement against HIV/aids denialism.

“Jerry's resistance arose from witnessing the preventable HIV-related deaths and new infections of infants, children, women and men. Mbeki's callousness led to millions of new infections, repeated painful illnesses, death and the destruction of family life. Never was a doctor so vilified as Jerry Coovadia in the ANC for his implacable and quietly militant stand against Thabo Mbeki.

“I have deep love for Jerry and Zubeida, one that compels me to remember him and to bring his life into the consciousness of every person I reach who values the right to life, dignity, health, equality and freedom from hunger, poverty and inequality.”

Maverick Citizen editor and a co-founder of the TAC Mark Heywood described Coovadia as a person true to his principles and science throughout his life. Heywood added: “Coovadia stood up to Mbeki and the late Manto Tshabalala-Msimang when it wasn't fashionable to oppose the ANC.”

The TAC, which drew strength from Coovadia's resistance to Aids denialism, released a statement in honour of his life. In it, TAC national chairperson Sibongile Tshabalala said: “As a person living openly with HIV,

I am one of the many people whose life was positively influenced by him. The country has lost a true leader, a hero of the HIV/Aids struggle.”

The TAC added: “In this critical time, we urge duty bearers to remember Prof Coovadia’s hopes for an equitable health system for all and ensure that universal health coverage is truly achieved. Lala ngokuthula Professor Coovadia.”

The Progressive Health Forum’s Aslam Dasoo described Coovadia as the last of an outstanding generation who did not flinch in the face of Aids denialism.

“[Jerry] inspired the powerful resistance to the prohibition on ARVs, taking the fight directly to its source, the Presidency and the upper ranks of the governing party. His legacy reflects the seamlessness of intellectual excellence and human solidarity as the essence of the health worker.”

Achmat and Dasoo’s admiration for Coovadia was echoed in a tribute from the [Rural Health Advocacy Project](#), which said: “His leadership was exemplified when he chaired the 13th International World Aids Conference in Durban, where he openly challenged misguided government policies that prioritised unproven alternative treatments over ARVs. His principled stance showcased his unwavering dedication to the truth and his refusal to be swayed by political pressure.”

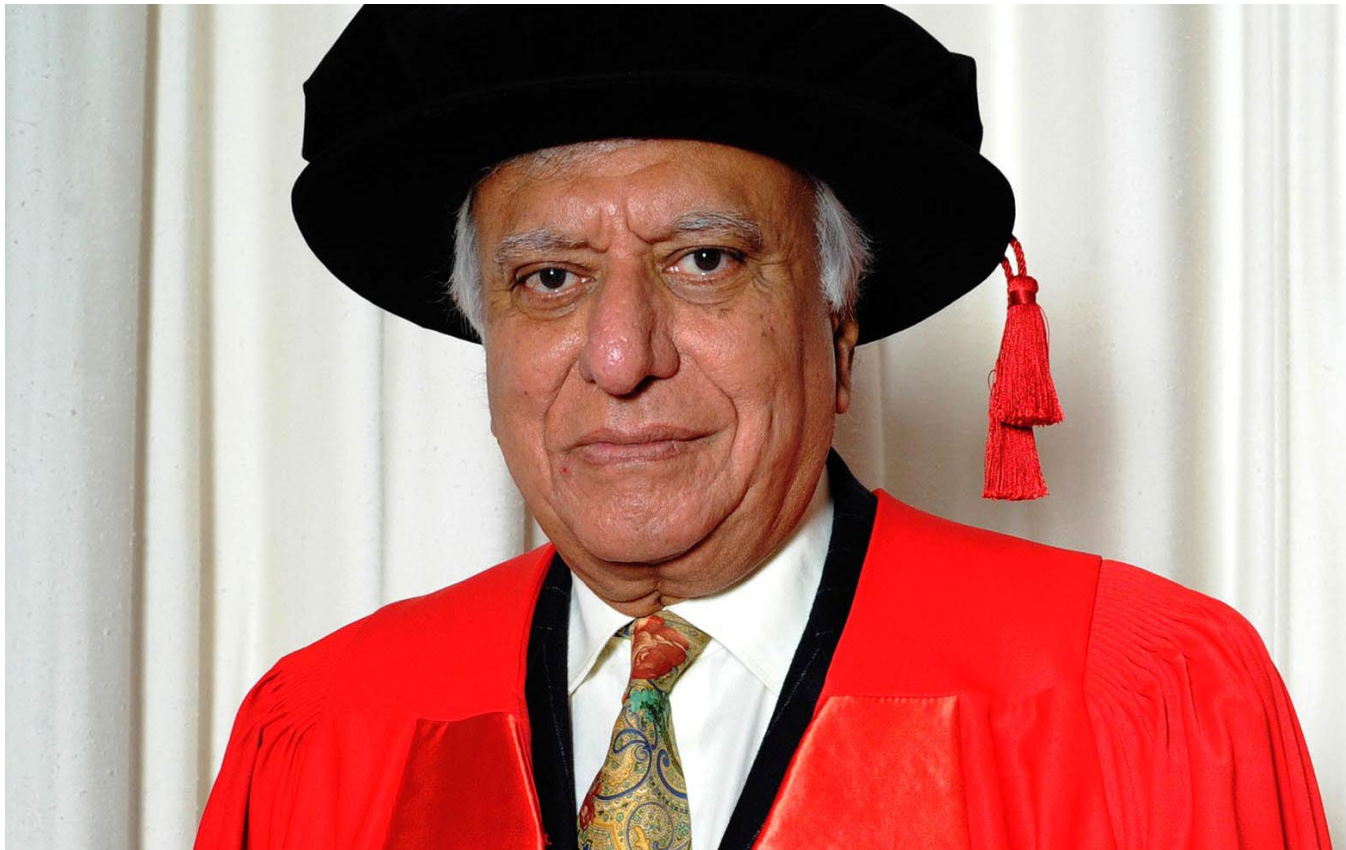
The RHAP added that Coovadia’s legacy would continue to inspire generations of healthcare professionals to serve with compassion, integrity and an unyielding dedication to the betterment of humankind.

It is with heartfelt sadness that our family mourns the loss of Professor Jerry Coovadia. We were as a family blessed to have him at our side – in tough and challenging times. We had the privilege of his wisdom, his words of encouragement and his mentorship. His frankness and depth of intellect have shaped our careers and commitment in social justice. Jerry was an extraordinary human being unwavering in his commitment to serve humanity. He is one of South Africa’s foremost intellectuals and his commitment to social justice, equity and fairness was a central tenet to his core belief systems. Beyond his science work he fought tirelessly against the cruel apartheid system and was forthright in his criticism of any form of corruption. His everlasting legacy was a principled one founded on his core beliefs of justice, fairness and equity for all. – Professors Salim and Quarraisha Abdool Karim: Caprisa

From the medical fraternity and beyond

Coovadia’s dedication to the medical field left a lasting impression, and he leaves behind many colleagues who remember him fondly.

Professor Rudo Mathivha, the head of ICU at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, remembered fondly how Coovadia took up the mantle for her when she was blocked from applying for the registrar's position at KEVII Hospital at the University of Natal because of her race.



Professor Jerry Coovadia was awarded an honorary degree in medicine from the University of Cape Town. (Photo: UCT / Wikipedia)

Mathivha was told that black women did not have the intellectual capacity to handle specialisation, but Coovadia would not take that lying down. “He told me I would get the post, and I must not undermine myself,” she recounted. “He supported me. He always offered his ear to listen, even when I was out of his teaching circuit. A great teacher. I never met his family, but I offer my condolences to them. Our souls would not see the rainbow if our eyes never shed tears.”

Former vice-chairperson of the Electoral Commission of South Africa Janet Love mourned the loss of an extraordinary human being: “A man of such great humility and wisdom, a man who embraced science and social commitment, whose fight for human rights was equalled by his steadfast integrity; who loved and fought for his country and the good of humanity.”

Speaking in her personal capacity and on behalf of the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation, the University of Cape Town's Professor Linda-Gail Bekker remembered Coovadia: “As a young medical officer starting out in northern KZN in the Eighties I was so thrilled to meet the clinician and

paediatrician who had written the ‘green book’ on paediatrics – it was inspiring! And Jerry was an inspiration then and remained so. A wonderful clinician committed to the cause and plight of children in this country and on this continent. May his memory be a blessing to us all – may Jerry rest in peace.”

Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences and professor of vaccinology at the University of the Witwatersrand Shabir Madhi said Coovadia will be remembered as an activist, freedom fighter, advocate, scientist, teacher, clinician and “one who was never afraid to speak truth to power up to the end”.

“He has left an indelible positive legacy which has touched the lives of many – from medical students, scientists, political and social activity, and the communities he served,” Madhi added.

South African Medical Research Council president, Professor Glenda Gray, described Coovadia as a dear colleague and wonderful role model for young paediatricians. Pharmacy expert Andy Gray remembered him as an irreplaceable and shining example of unwavering principle over so many years.

A very rare combination of a great academic mind, a health activist and an overall liberation struggle and progressive political leader.

ANC veteran Dr Fazel Randera and Professor Helen Rees, founder and executive director of the Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (RHI) at Wits University, reflected on the life and legacy of Coovadia. They said: “Jerry has been a consistent fighter for academic freedom and excellence, non-racialism, human rights, and a South Africa committed to democracy, equity and the eradication of poverty. Another giant tree has fallen.”

Sham Maharaj, an activist from Phoenix in Durban, remembered Coovadia for his work to uplift the local community. “Jerry was one of the stalwarts that helped to establish the Phoenix Working Committee and Phoenix Child Welfare in the late Seventies and early Eighties. May his soul rest in peace... Will always be remembered as our selfless leader.”

Politicians pay tribute

President Cyril Ramaphosa added to the outpouring of grief, paying tribute to Coovadia’s legacy as a scientist and struggle stalwart.

“His pioneering, globally acclaimed research into mother-to-child transmission of HIV has rendered an immeasurable legacy to humanity in terms of which persons living with HIV are able to live long and healthy lives subject to early detection and access to treatment.

“Our nation’s loss will be felt globally, but we can take pride at and comfort from the emergence of a giant of science and an icon of compassion and resilience from our country,” he said.

Health Minister Joe Phahla also touched on Coovadia’s contribution to health equity and politics in South Africa. “There [are] not enough words to describe his contribution to South Africa. A very rare combination of a great academic mind, a health activist and an overall liberation struggle and progressive political leader... Many of us acknowledge that the little contribution we are making to society is thanks to his guidance over many years. Hamba Kahle Cde Prof Jerry.”

Precious Matsoso, the former director-general of the Department of Health, also mourned the loss of a world-renowned leader, mentor, scientist, educator, clinician, researcher and expert.

Former finance minister and chairperson of the board of directors at Old Mutual Trevor Manuel acknowledged Coovadia’s contribution to the National Planning Commission and healthcare in South Africa.

“What a treasure his knowledge and contributions have been on healthcare, but also across the board. [Jerry] was always well-reasoned, immensely informed and exceedingly persuasive. May the family find peace!” Manuel said.

The ANC said that because of his vast knowledge and groundbreaking contribution to medical research, Coovadia’s death leaves South Africa and the world poorer.

“The ANC dips its revolutionary flag in mourning an intellectual giant and great patriot who dedicated his life to freedom, equality and justice.”

Coovadia is survived by his wife Zubie and children Imraan and Anoushka. **DM**