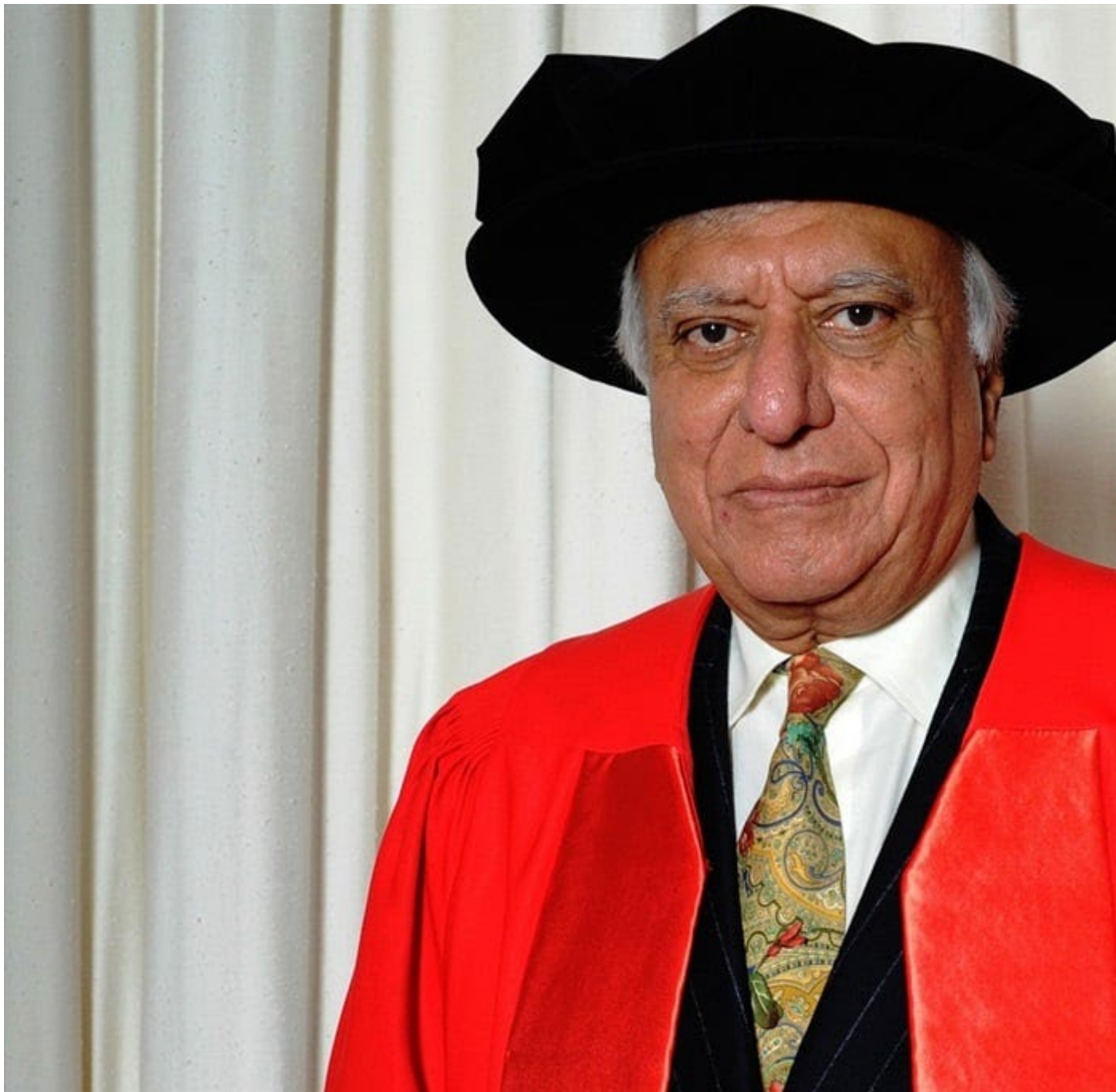


TRIBUTE | Salim Abdool Karim: We've lost a great scientist with Jerry Coovadia's passing

Salim Abdool Karim

Comments

05:54



Professor Jerry Coovadia, an HIV/Aids expert and a prominent figure in the struggle for liberation and human rights, has died at the age of 83.

*South Africa has lost one of its greatest intellectuals following the death of Jerry Coovadia who has consistently contributed to our international standing in medical research and democracy, writes **Salim Abdool Karim.***

South Africa has lost one of its greatest medical scientists, paediatricians and champions for freedom and justice. We are profoundly saddened by the passing of Professor Hoosen Coovadia, our mentor, colleague and dearest friend, who will be remembered for his unwavering integrity.

"Jerry", as he was fondly known, was a remarkable human being - a force of nature and a brilliant scientist. South Africa has lost one of its greatest intellectuals who has consistently contributed to our international standing in medical research and democracy.

My wife Quarraisha and I were mentored by him. He was an unparalleled intellect and never compromised on anything less than world-class excellence. He supervised both PhDs, during which he had a major influence on our research, forcing us repeatedly to push the boundaries of knowledge. As a mentor to us and his many other students, he leaves a legacy of science and service to humanity.

I pay tribute to his wife, Dr Zubie Hamed, son Professor Imraan Coovadia and daughter Dr Anushka Coovadia, for their unwavering support during his many years spent fighting for social justice.

READ | [HIV/Aids expert Professor Jerry Coovadia dies aged 83, leaves behind 'an immeasurable legacy'](#)

Professor Coovadia played a prominent role in the struggle for a democratic South Africa and took a principled stand against non-racialism. He graduated from Grant Medical College, University of Bombay, with an MBBS degree in 1965. There, he became politically active and was instrumental in forming a political body called the South African Students Association. They invited Indian politicians to speak about independence and the African National Congress in exile to address them.

In the 1970s, he was one of the key figures in the Natal Indian Congress and was subsequently elected vice president. In the 1980s, he was also involved in the United Democratic Front and was an Executive member of the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA), which was set up by progressive doctors following the Medical Association's complacency regarding the doctors who were involved in Steve Biko's death.

Ground-breaking research

In the 1980s, he was part of a delegation to meet the African National Congress in Lusaka before the organisation was unbanned. He took part in the preliminary discussions and negotiations at the Congress for a Democratic South Africa. As a result of his political activities, Professor Coovadia was targeted by the apartheid regime – his house was bombed during the political turbulence in the early 1990s.

Professor Coovadia specialised in paediatrics at the University of Natal and became a Fellow of the College of Paediatricians of the College of Medicine of South Africa in 1971. In 1974, he obtained his MSc in Immunology from the University of Birmingham. His interest in paediatric HIV/AIDS developed in the early 1990s as the extent of the tragedy in South Africa began to be recognised. His particular interest was the transmission of the virus from mother to child. He is internationally recognised for his ground-breaking research in HIV/AIDS transmission from mother to child, especially through breastfeeding.

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His international stature in HIV/AIDS led to his election as Chairperson of the XIIIth International Conference on AIDS, held in Durban in July 2000. This brought him national and international accolades but also resulted in clashes with some prominent government figures at the time, especially President Thabo Mbeki and Minister Tshabalala-Msimang.

After retiring as Head of Paediatrics, Professor Coovadia was appointed the Victor Daitz Chair in HIV/AIDS Research and Director of Biomedical Science at the Centre for HIV/AIDS Networking (HIVAN) at the Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, University of Natal. He thereafter served in the leadership of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA).

Fierce critic

In 2010, he was appointed together with a group of experts to government's National Planning Commission to guide the development plan of South Africa. He was a fierce critic of maladministration and corruption in government and was vocal about how he felt that the struggle for a free and just country was being jeopardised by greed and incompetence.

Professor Coovadia received numerous accolades and awards including the Star of South Africa and the *Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights* for his contributions to democracy and health; honorary doctorates by the Universities of Durban Westville, Witwatersrand and Cape Town; silver medal from the MRC; Foreign Member of the US National Academy of Medicine; the Science-for-Society Gold Medal award of the Academy of Science of South Africa; a Lifetime Achievement Award during the HIV Congress in India; the American Association for the Advancement of Science Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award; the International Association of Physicians in AIDS and Care Award; and the Heroes in Medicine Award in Toronto, Canada.

- *Professor Salim Abdool Karim is the director of CAPRISA*