

Tributes pour in for acclaimed SA Aids scientist Gita Ramjee

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Tributes have been pouring in from around the world for internationally acclaimed scientist, academic and women's rights campaigner Prof Gita Ramjee who died in a Durban hospital of Covid-19 complications on Tuesday.

A family member, who asked not to be named, confirmed Ramjee's death following complications arising from asthma and pneumonia, and that she had been cremated. He said her husband, Praveen, a well known pharmacist was "lost" following her death.

At the time of her death, Ramjee worked at healthcare organisation Aurum Institute, which is regarded as a global authority on HIV and TB prevention and eradication.

In a statement, Prof Gavin Churchyard, Aurum Institute group CEO, said: "The Aurum Institute and the global HIV research community will mourn Gita Ramjee's passing and celebrate the huge contribution to the response to HIV she made in her life.

"Gita firmly believed in health as a fundamental human right. Her groundbreaking research in HIV prevention contributed to the global response to HIV and Aids. Our thoughts during this difficult time are with her family, colleagues and the many people her life and work touched."

Her death was mourned by several of her former colleagues including Prof Glenda Gray at the SA Medical Research Council, where she worked as chief specialist scientist and director of the HIV Prevention Research Unit at the SA Medical Research Council.

Gray issued a memo to staff of the "tragic passing of Prof Gita Ramjee in hospital today. Prof Ramjee died of Covid-19 related complications".

Leading SA clinical infectious diseases epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim, who took Ramjee under his wing at the SAMRC, said he was "devastated" by her death.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal also issued a communique to staff and students informing them of the death of their former colleague after travelling abroad.

She was acclaimed in the field of HIV prevention clinical trials and was acknowledged internationally for her expertise in the field of microbicide research, including a Lifetime Achievement Award for HIV Prevention.

In 2018, she was honoured with the "Outstanding Female Scientist" Award by the European Development Clinical Trials Partnerships (EDCTP) for her work focusing on finding new HIV prevention methods.

The department of health did not respond to queries about Ramjee's death.