

**H**OW do you think we can slow the spread of the virus?" These words from health minister Zweli Mkhize were all Professor Salim Abdool Karim needed to hear to spring into action.

The world-renowned scientist is no stranger to tackling an invisible enemy sowing death and destruction – two decades ago he was involved in SA's efforts to try to halt the spread of HIV/Aids.

Back then, however, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang was the health minister and Thabo Mbeki was president – and their now-notorious belief that things such as garlic and beetroot could stem the tide led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people.

Salim butted heads left, right and centre with the leadership back then – but SA is a different place now. Mkhize is a rational minister who seeks out advice; President Cyril Ramaphosa relies on the knowledge of the experts to plot the way forward. And experts don't come much better than Salim.

"Slim", as he's known to his friends, now leads the ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19 research and scientific evidence and he knows what needs to be done.

"With HIV we were so slack with taking things up, we delayed mother-to-child-prevention of HIV and access to antiretroviral treatment. But with Covid-19 we're proactive and we're acting early," he says.

Most South Africans got to "meet" Salim (59) when he appeared on national TV on 13 April to update the nation on our progress in fighting the virus – and he impressed just about everybody.

In his hour-long presentation he explained our situation in layman's terms and he didn't hold back when it came to giving us the bad news.

"Can South Africa escape the worst of this epidemic? Is the exponential spread avoidable? The answer is that it's very, very unlikely. Put simply: no, we can't escape this epidemic," he said.

Once the lockdown ends new cases are likely. "What we would hope for is that the number of new cases will steadily decline and will disappear and that's the end of the story.

"I'm sorry to say that's very unlikely. The more likely [scenario] is that we've

**'With HIV we were so slack but with Covid-19 we're proactive and acting early'**

A renowned scientist, Professor Salim Abdool Karim has been keeping the nation up to date on SA's fight against Covid-19.

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# IN EXPERT HANDS

He's the man advising the government in the country's fight against Covid-19. So who is Professor Salim Abdool Karim?

BY GEZZY S SIBISI