

OBITUARY

FAREWELL TO A DEDICATED SCIENTIST AND FRIEND

SALIM S ABDOOL KARIM

I LEARNT with deep sadness of the untimely death of Professor Gita Ramjee, who passed away in hospital on Tuesday, March 31, from a Covid-19-related illness.

Ramjee was not only a colleague, she was a dear friend, a scientist and scholar in HIV prevention, a mother of two sons, a grandmother and a wife to her husband, Praveen.

On behalf of Caprisa (Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa), Quarraisha and I wish to extend our heartfelt condolences to her family and friends.

Her passing is an immense loss and has left an indelible void in HIV research and treatment, particularly on the African continent.

Ramjee was the chief scientific officer of HIV Prevention at the Aurum Institute.

For several years she held the position of chief specialist scientist and director of the South African Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) HIV Prevention Unit as well as clinical professor of global health at the department of global health in the School of Medicine at the University of Washington, Seattle.

She held an honorary professorship in the department of epidemiology and population health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and was an honorary scientist at Caprisa.

She was a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh and received several awards and accolades for her scientific work.

In 2018, she was awarded the EDCTP/ EU Outstanding African Female Scientist award and in 2017 she received the SAMRC Gold Medal Scientific Achievement Award.

She was a member of several local and international committees and published more than 200 research articles. She epitomised dedication and commitment to her scientific calling – to control the HIV epidemic.

I recall my first discussion with her while she was a post-doc with Professor Coovadia doing research on kidney disease – her passion, commitment and dedication to science shone through so clearly that I recruited her to join me at the Medical Research Council a few months later.

She climbed through the ranks at the MRC to succeed me as the Head of the HIV Prevention Research Unit. She was an excellent role-model of what can be achieved through sheer determination and hard work.

It was a privilege to mentor and work with Ramjee over the past 26 years. Known for her unwavering tenacity, she embarked on new challenges with boldness and enthusiasm. This was the key to her success – her innate ability to persevere.

In an interview in 2018, her poignant words summed up her chutzpah: "I did not dream that the love of my job, my passion and drive would get me this far! If I was much younger and not committed to my family life, I think I would like to have done a medical degree after my PhD."

Professor Ramjee trained as a basic scientist at the University of Sunderland in the UK. She completed a Master's degree in the role of aflatoxins in childhood malnutrition at the former University of Natal. She received a MRC scholarship to pursue her PhD, which focused on the role of proteinuria in childhood kidney diseases.

Thereafter, she worked with me leading the COL-1492 vaginal microbicide trial for the prevention of HIV among a group of sex workers working along the trucking route between Durban and Johannesburg. She later commented that the trial was her introduction to HIV prevention among high-risk populations.

I have fond memories of Professor Ramjee – her passion, drive and tenacity which she believed were "critical traits to have for scientific excellence". She will be remembered for her commitment to finding ways to empower women to protect themselves from HIV and for making a difference in the lives of so many researchers and research participants over the years.

Professor Abdool Karim is the director of Caprisa