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Slim: The life, times and education of Salim Abdool Karim

news24 Sarah Evans



Prof Salim Abdool Karim, then president of the South African Medical Research Board, and Dr Trevor Mudel of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (University of Cape Town)

*Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the government's chief adviser on Covid-19, has achieved worldwide acclaim in a career spanning more than 30 years. He has straddled science and activism in his professional life, and helped stare down Thabo Mbeki on HIV. But this, the battle against the coronavirus, is his moment, writes **Sarah Evans**.*

There is a photograph of Professor Salim Abdool Karim that sums it all up: It was taken in 2018 at the March for Science in Durban, and photographer Rajesh Jantilal has captured Abdool Karim mid-frame. He is wearing a white coat, with a megaphone in his hand, at a protest in the rain. His index finger gestures downwards, making a point; he is tall, authoritative, and soaked.

The image is probably the best description never written about him: The 59-year-old is a scientist, with an activist heart, who is not afraid of stormy weather.

“Slim”, as he is affectionately known, is now the chairperson of the 45-person Ministerial Advisory Committee, advising Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on Covid-19. And to scientists, and anyone involved in opposing former president Thabo Mbeki's HIV/Aids policies, he is a familiar face.

But he shot to national fame this week when he appeared beside Mkhize at an online public engagement to present the facts and figures behind the government's Covid-19 response to the public. The demand for interviews from journalists has been unrelenting since Monday, an assistant says, slightly out of breath. Were Dr Anthony Fauci, the US' chief scientist on infectious diseases or Nobel Laureate Francois Barre-Sinoussi, the co-discoverer of HIV, to pass Slim in the corridor, they would stop for a

catch-up chat with their friend (all appropriate social distancing measures considered). But despite his presence on the international stage, this much is clear: His Covid-19 work will secure his place in the history books. Because this is Slim's moment; the high watermark of a career spent breaking new ground on infectious diseases.

A life spent studying viruses

In a webinar with News24 this week, Abdool Karim described what appears to be a grueling work schedule, with a relaxed grin and laid-back demeanour. After working all day, and having dinner with his family, he starts a "second day" from about 20:30 until about 02:00, a routine he has had for many years.

When he was called upon by Mkhize to help him manage the Covid-19 crisis, he happily agreed. "I didn't ask to do any of this, I was asked to come and do it," he said. Never one to shy away from a deadly and incurable disease, Slim agreed.

He said he started out studying measles and epidemics before he chaired the government's expert committee on polio. He then focused on immunisation, with Hepatitis-B and HIV his main areas of research.



Salim Abdool Karim approaches his work with “fitness, ardour, depth, and intelligence”. (Media24 Archive)

"I've spent most of my life studying viruses. So, in a way, this was an obvious challenge to take up." His wife, Quarraisha, is an equally accomplished epidemiologist, famous for her contributions to Aids research. Their two daughters, Safura and Aisha, are a public health lawyer and a health journalist, respectively.

'A wonderful PhD...'

In an interview with academic journal *The Lancet*, Slim said he entered medicine as a second choice, "to be on the safe side", as options for Indians were limited in the turbulent 1970s. His first choice was engineering. As fate would have it, that option did not materialise, and he found himself graduating from the then-University of Natal as a doctor.

Slim and Quarraisha's PhD supervisor, Struggle stalwart and acclaimed HIV/Aids researcher and paediatrician Professor Hoosen "Jerry" Coovadia, remembers an impressive young student.

Slim approached his work with "fitness, ardour, depth, and intelligence". His thesis on Hepatitis-B in children was undertaken "surprisingly carefully" and he showed a knack for epidemiology that would stand him in good stead later in his career.

"He was the first person I'd met who could do a population-level survey of where Hep-B strikes; every bit of the epidemiological and social implications of the problem. And he did a wonderful PhD. on it. That was the beginning of my appreciation of him."



Several decades later, Slim has a CV that stretches all the way from UNAIDS, to the World Health Organisation, Columbia University, Harvard University and the South African Medical Research Council. In South Africa, he is best known for being the director of the Centre for Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa).

In 2019, he added the title of Fellow of the Royal Society to his name, joining the ranks of Sir Isaac Newton as among the most respected scientists in the world. After a career of 30 years, when Slim calls, scientists answer. Professor Brian Williams, a mathematician with decades of experience in TB research, tells News24 from Switzerland Slim asked him to assist with expert advice on Covid-19.

He appeared electronically from Geneva as part of the government's unprecedented public engagement on Covid-19 on Monday night at 30 minute's notice because "Slim called".

Showing up Mbeki

While his international reputation is largely that of a scientist, in South Africa his reputation straddles the realms of science and activism. Even his presence at Mkhize's side this week harked back to Mbeki: the minister and the doctor were students together at university.

Thirty years after graduating, the two men stood in a hotel room at The Hilton Hotel in Durban as former health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang rained hellfire on Slim and Coovadia, for daring to oppose the government's stance on HIV/Aids.

Mkhize representing the government (although not necessarily agreeing with it), Abdool Karim opposing it. The incident took place on the sidelines of the International Aids Conference in Durban in 2000. Coovadia chaired the conference, while Slim, his former pupil, was the scientific programme chairperson. There, the two scientists and their many colleagues around the world plotted to jolt the Mbeki government into action by either persuading it with science, or by shaming it into action.

The incident at the hotel

It was the moment Slim became acquainted with politics, having spent most of his career outside of it; it was a baptism of fire for the scientist. Tshabalala-Msimang ordered Slim and Coovadia to her hotel room at The Hilton to give them a dressing-down about the goings on at the conference. Mkhize was there as well as current deputy health minister Joe Phaahla, and others.

After being derided by the minister for his belief in science, Coovadia, with a long history in the struggle against apartheid as a leader of the United Democratic Front and other structures, had had just about enough.



Salim Abdool Karim delivers an address at the World Aids Conference in Durban in 2018. (Media24 Archive)

"She started giving us a lecture, asking how we could oppose the government and so on. I said to her, 'You were overseas, you weren't here [during the Struggle]. I was here, they bombed my house, not yours'." And then the late minister said something that Coovadia says he will never forget. "She looked at the two of us and said, 'You two, you are here now, but tomorrow all your friends will be gone. And then there will be me, and then there will be you'."

Nelson Mandela closed the conference to rapturous applause - a public relations coup for Coovadia and his colleagues. A seminal declaration emanated from the conference, showing the scientific community united in its opposition to the dissidence by Mbeki.

That combined with the political heft of Mandela and the emotive address by child activist Nkosi Johnson arguably changed the course of history. With Slim at his side, Coovadia and his colleagues sealed Mbeki's fate as a pariah of the international community.

Slim, the ally

With his baptism of fire complete, Slim went on to become an ally of HIV/Aids activists in South Africa. Mark Heywood, formerly of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), remembers his contribution. "He was already a researcher in the field, but was also open to making connections with activists. So, from very early on, the TAC relied on him to make medical knowledge accessible to community activists... He and his wife played an important role," said Heywood.

Slim went on to become a signatory to another crucial declaration at the Bredel Conference in 2001, lending his scientific weight to the TAC and other organisation's position on the use of anti-retroviral drugs.

Is he a good fit for this position?

"Undoubtedly," Heywood said. "He's not a pushover, because of his stand against Mbeki, so he has the necessary independence. But he like all of us, he thinks that where the government is good, it needs support. He also has the respect of the scientific community."



With Gwen Ramokgopa, a former deputy minister of health. (Media24 Archive)

He has the respect, yes. But also the affection. Slim is always spoken of with a touch of kindness, and a slant of respect. More recently, with a healthy dose of name-dropping.

So where does the nickname come from?

It is a sensitive subject, and while his friends and colleagues now say the name comes from the Afrikaans word for clever, that's not really the truth. The slender-faced man who appeared at Mkhize's side that night did not look the same as he did 30 years ago. Gently, and with a chuckle, Coovadia explains: "Slim wasn't always exactly *slim*." But since the translation from Afrikaans is kinder and, these days, far more accurate, so its connotation as a nod to his looks has been let go.

Slim means clever. Indeed.