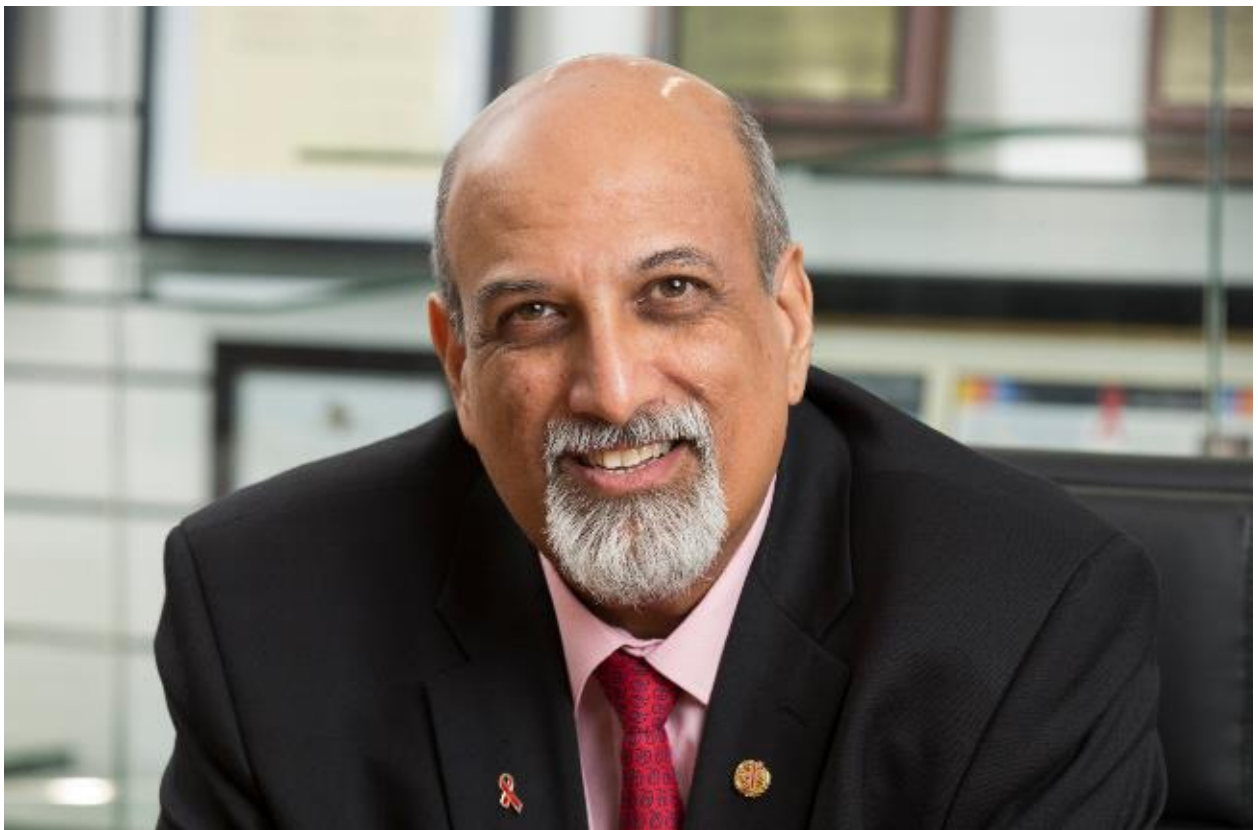




## REVIEW | The face and voice of SA's battle against Covid-19 tells his and fellow scientists' story

Lesley Cowling Tuesday, 22 August



Salim Abdool Karim  
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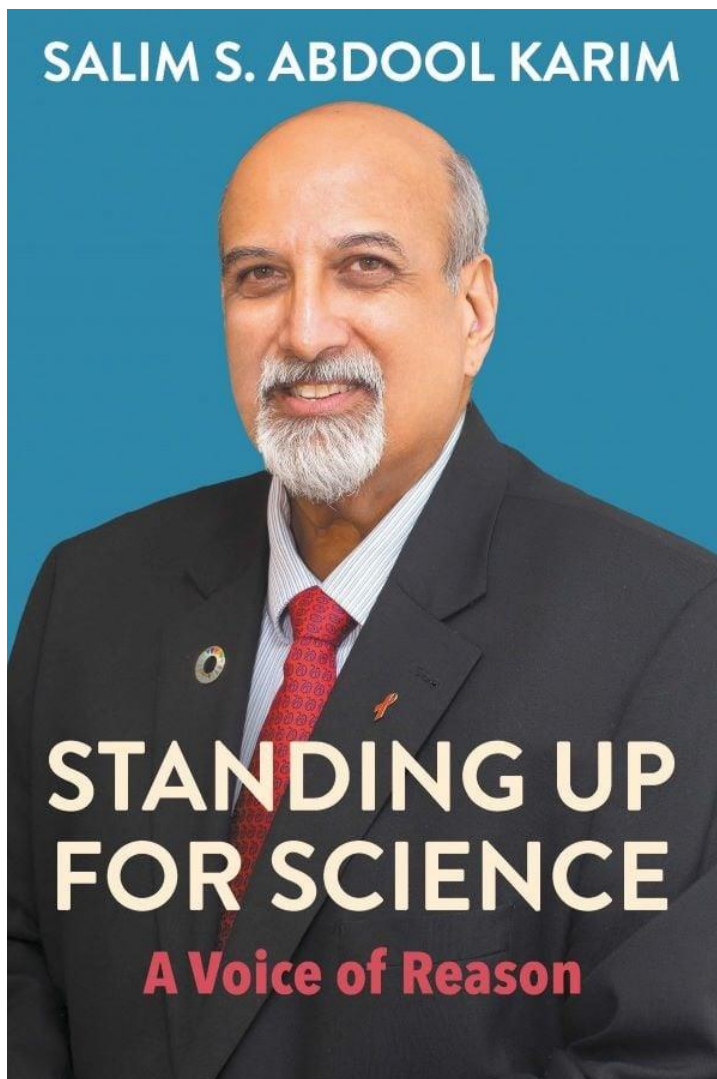
**BOOK: Standing up for Science: A Voice of Reason by Salim S Abdool Karim (Pan Macmillan)**

When I first saw this book cover and title, I assumed that it might be a bit of a lecture on science and misinformation and the importance of rational decision-making – a kind of public understanding of science manifesto.

But the face on the cover encouraged me to pick it up. After all, wasn't this Professor Abdool Karim, not only the face but also the voice of scientific advice during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic? When we were anxiously trawling news sites and tuning into family meetings, wasn't he one of the foremost public scientists explaining the virus to us, in simple terms and with the soothing bedside manner of a family doctor? He performed the conjuring trick of imparting difficult – sometimes terrifying – details, in a voice of calm confidence that always made you feel better.

And, in fact, the book returns us to the pandemic.

For those of us who obsessively watched the news and read everything related to Covid-19, trying to puzzle out what this virus meant for our lives, the book revisits what we already know, and covers all the phases we went through. Its interest for us today is that we see the pandemic unfold, not from our own cloistered perspective, but from the experience of the scientists and medical experts.



Covid-19 was a new virus, and how it would circulate, infect and then sicken people was a mystery to everyone at the outset. There was an immediate expectation from society that the scientific community should advise on what to do, and scientists had to take on this responsibility, even though they had very little to go on.

There were a myriad issues to consider. Did masks make a difference? Would lockdown interrupt transmission? How should hospitals and medical facilities prepare for patients? How many people was it safe to transport in a taxi? And, later, what was the best way to treat and prevent Covid-19? All this without any established research on any of these things.

Scientists across the world immediately began collaborating. This included Chinese scientists, who were sharing whatever they had managed to glean from the outbreak in Wuhan, and virologists, epidemiologists, medical practitioners – a starkly different approach from many world leaders (then US president Donald Trump's accusations against China and his willingness to entertain conspiracy theories spring to mind).

Research projects sprang up across the world – and in a breach of usual scientific protocols – their results were shared without going through the lengthy processes of peer review and other checks before publication. Very risky for an academic, as any misstep in the process can expose you to serious criticism, and even end your career.

Abdool Karim shows, in great detail and with many examples, how this collaboration took place. I personally found it heartening to see how many of our scientists were willing to do "country duty", and also that – especially in the beginning – the government was eager to be led by the science. Abdool Karim also recounts, in detail, the ways in which scientists interfaced with government through the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC).

One thing missing from the book, I think, is an account some of the debates and discomfort that emerged from the scientific community's closeness to government, and the ways in which they may have felt implicated by policy decisions that they did not recommend – examples would include the alcohol and smoking bans and the restrictions on what clothing and food could be sold during lockdown.

Abdool Karim makes it clear that he saw the role of the MAC as advising government, and not making policy; he enumerates the decisions on which the scientists had no input. But the book could have gone further in exploring both the goods and bads of scientists being so close to government, because this is a key issue in the public's attitude to science.

Much of the book deals with the disinformation and hostility to him personally and to other scientists that emerged as the pandemic progressed, especially on the matter of vaccines and the treatment of Covid-19 with untested medications.

Generally, it is social networks and news media that get the blame for "fake news" – but the book shows that the origins of much of the misinformation emerged from actors within scientific and medical communities. Abdool Karim tracks the emergence of the belief that Ivermectin was a cure, and notes that this was taken up by local doctors and pharmacists – and even some university researchers. Many of these medical professionals continued to prescribe it long after the World Health Organisation declared that it was not helpful, and after other, effective treatments had become available.

There was a knock-on effect, with local news sites giving space to these voices – which is not really surprising, because journalists are not necessarily equipped to mediate between different "experts" – but then the idea gained traction across South Africa.

*Standing up for Science* will have something to teach everyone, although anti-vaxxers who have decided that the scientific establishment is a monolith, hand in glove with Big Pharma, are unlikely to read it. But, for the curious reader, who would like to know more about what happens in the medical sciences, it provides a lot of insight.

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