

AIDS RELIEF PROGRAMME

SA scientist calls for Pefpar to be reauthorised without restrictions

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One of SA's foremost HIV/Aids researchers, Salim Abdool Karim, has joined internationally renowned scientists in urging the US Congress to reauthorise the US President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (Pepfar) with no strings attached, saying compromising the decades-long Aids relief programme would reverse hard-won gains against the disease.

Pepfar has historically had bipartisan support, but this year several Republican politicians delayed its next five-year term by demanding reauthorisation be linked to new abortion-related restrictions. These legislators want to impose a prohibition on Pepfar providing funds to organisations that provide or make referrals to abortion services, or give information about termina-

tion of pregnancy, even if they use funding from other sources to do so.

Writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the scientists said if Pepfar received anything less than its next five-year reauthorisation, global Aids programmes would be jeopardised, and there would be little chance of reaching the global 2030 goal of ending HIV/Aids as a public health threat. The current term ends on September 30.

"We could see a substantial increase in new HIV infections and Aids deaths, with a big concern that treatment interruptions may lead to drug-resistant forms of HIV spreading across the world," said Abdool Karim, Columbia University professor of global health and director of Caprisa, an AIDS research centre in SA, and co-author of the article. "The Covid-19 pandemic

showed how the world is interconnected and that no country would be spared a resurgent HIV epidemic," he said.

Pepfar was established by former Republican president George W Bush in 2003 to support the countries hardest hit by the HIV/Aids epidemic, including SA, where it is the biggest foreign donor to the country's HIV programmes. While the SA government has funded the lion's share of the country's HIV/Aids programmes from the fiscus, it has received billions of dollars from Pepfar, which provides SA with slightly more than \$450m per year.

Co-author Nobel laureate Harold Varmus, a former director of the US National Institutes of Health, said: "Pepfar is among the most significant and successful public health programmes in history ... Suspen-

sion would cost many lives, damage health systems, and undermine the US's reputation around the world."

Abortion-related funding restrictions, known as the global gag rule, were first introduced as an executive order by late US president Ronald Reagan in 1984, and have been rescinded and resurrected by successive presidents. The scientists said proponents of these restrictions were now seeking to codify the global gag rule into US law, a measure that if successful would be at odds with laws in other countries, including SA.

"Implementing the global gag rule would be illegal in some countries, such as SA, where abortion laws require healthcare providers to, at minimum, refer patients to abortion services when they are clinically indicated," they said.