

Honorary Award

A steadfastly honest path

The man who led the Covid advisory body from March became popular and trusted

By LYNETTE DICEY

● Leaders have an opportunity to provide their people with a sense of security, and to connect, motivate and inspire them. This year the Sunday Times Top 100 Companies salutes professor Salim Abdool Karim with an honorary award for providing guidance and inspiration to the nation throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The acknowledgement is in recognition of his dedication, commitment and courage.

The pandemic placed the clinical infectious diseases epidemiologist squarely in the public eye. Appointed in mid-March to lead the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) advising the government on combating Covid-19, he has become a familiar face in recent months during live televised public briefings delivered in his characteristically calm and measured manner.

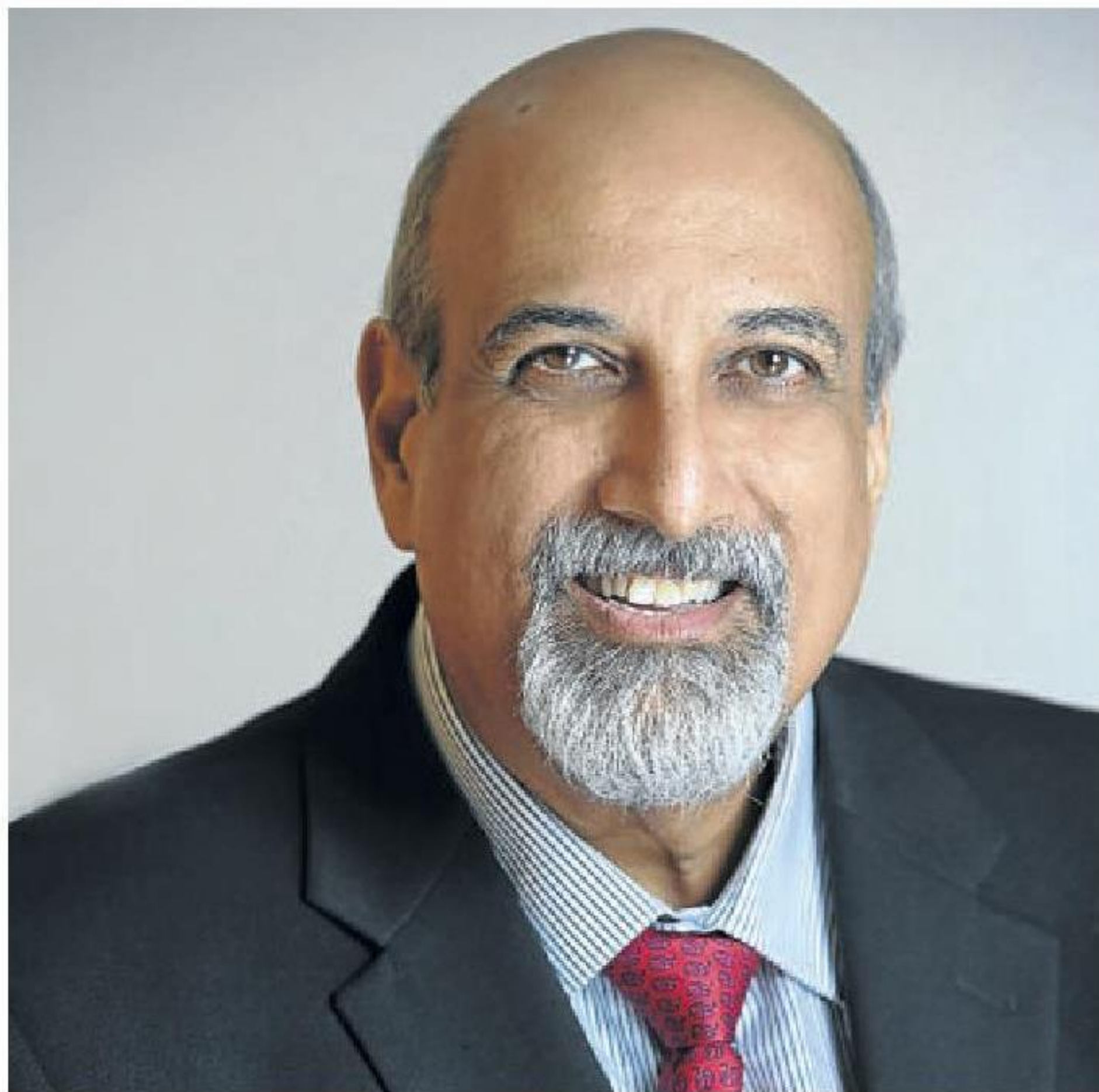
His ability to translate complex science into easily understandable language resonated with a nation in a high state of anxiety in the early days of the lockdown, and he quickly became a popular and, even more importantly, a trusted and credible figure.

Abdool Karim is no stranger to public platforms or high-profile positions. He is a director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA (Caprisa) and Caprisa professor of global health at Columbia University, New York.

In addition, he is an adjunct professor of immunology and infectious diseases at Harvard University, an adjunct professor of medicine at Cornell University and pro vice-chancellor (research) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

He has previously served as president of the SA Medical Research Council.

He first came to the public's attention two decades ago, when he was one of the most prominent scientists to speak out against Aids denialist Thabo Mbeki, then SA's president. As key leaders of the 2000 Internation-



Prof Salim Abdool Karim.

al Aids Conference in Durban, Abdool Karim and colleagues Jerry Coovadia and Malegapuru Makgoba were frequently in the public eye as a result of their vocal rebuttals of this denialism.

Ministerial advisories, says Abdool Karim, consist of three sections. The first is typically a question posed by the minister of health, the second consists of the scientific evidence and the third is the advisory committee's recommendation.

"Looking back, it's clear almost all [the MAC's] recommendations were followed, sometimes not exactly but in some shape or form," he says. However, as an adviser you are not responsible for all the decisions made by the government, he stresses.

"The reality is that even scientists don't always agree with each other all the time. Independently minded, knowledgeable scientists are not renowned for following the crowd. Disagreements, therefore, are not uncommon. As a member of an advisory committee it's important to listen to everyone's diverse viewpoint and appreciate differences of opinion."

Diversity of opinion, he believes, was a strength of the MAC on Covid-19, allowing it to provide "pretty good advice".

When Abdool Karim is discussing the role of an adviser he knows what he's talking about. He sits on numerous respected advisory boards, including the WHO's HIV Strategic and Technical Advisory Committee and the WHO HIV/TB Taskforce. He's chair of the UNAids Scientific Expert Panel.

Ranked among the world's most highly

cited scientists by the Web of Science platform, Abdool Karim says a good leader is somebody who listens and keeps an open mind before making a judgment and providing a way forward. Importantly, a good leader does not allow differences in opinion to lead to a situation of paralysis where no decisions are made. "I've used the Codesa negotiations approach of 'sufficient consensus' as a way for moving forward in the midst of uncertainty," he says.

The process followed by the MAC on Covid-19 included the submission of constantly revised advisories, with additional input allowed at multiple stages.

"The challenge with this epidemic is that the evidence keeps changing. Covid-19 has resulted in a knowledge explosion. Over 70,000 articles about the disease have already been published in 10 months."

What the pandemic has done, he says, is to democratise science, making it more accessible. He is regularly contacted by people from all walks of life writing to him about their analyses of the coronavirus data and interpretations of the epidemic. However, he says calls to "follow the science" in a bid to understand how to handle Covid-19 have placed a great burden on the discipline.

"In the beginning there was little or no scientific evidence. We were going on information and experiences from other diseases, like influenza."

What Abdool Karim would like to be remembered for is that he always put the public first, acknowledged uncertainty and what he did not know, maintained a steadfastly honest path and never sugar-coated the truth. He predicts that pandemics like Covid-19 will become more frequent occurrences, and are likely to be more severe. Hopefully we've learnt valuable lessons this time round which will stand us in good stead for the next one.

For now, Abdool Karim is more than content to focus on his regular work of HIV research and feed his addiction for sport in front of a television set.

He can still be found going for walks on Durban's beaches with his wife but you'll have to look carefully for him.

In an attempt to have an uninterrupted walk he has taken to wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses to disguise himself, as well as, of course, a face mask.