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Profile

Hoosen Coovadia: an icon of South African health

Professor Hoosen “Jerry” Coovadia is a giant of medicine in South Africa. The anti-apartheid veteran broke through the barriers of racist rule to establish himself as a top paediatrician and then became an international authority on HIV/AIDS, especially mother-to-child transmission. He incurred the wrath of Thabo Mbeki’s Government by insisting on scientific integrity and campaigning for the rollout of antiretroviral therapy, and he has nurtured a generation of medical students with his prolific research.

“He’s like a Nelson Mandela in health”, says Glenda Gray, Director of the University of Witwatersrand’s Perinatal HIV Research Unit. Despite the international accolades and awards accrued over the years, Coovadia exudes an air of modesty and wry humour as he discusses his early activist days, his achievements, and his passion for tennis and literature (listen to this week’s podcast for an interview with Coovadia). He studied medicine in Mumbai, India, because as a non-white in apartheid South Africa he required government permission to travel to the University of Cape Town, which was denied. Upon graduation, in 1965, he returned to South Africa and spent most of his career in his native KwaZulu-Natal, becoming professor and head of the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of Natal from 1990 to 2000. He became prominent in the anti-apartheid movement during the 1970s when he was in the leadership of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and was on the executive of the National Medical and Dental Association, set up after revelations of complicity by doctors in the police torture of Steve Biko.

Coovadia doesn’t hide his relief at the end of the Mbeki Government and says that appointments made by President Jacob Zuma and his personal visits to monitor service delivery “hold much promise if maintained”. Coovadia is outraged, however, that past government policies have “allowed a small elite group of people to put their noses in the trough”. He also shudders at the levels of violence that continue to plague South African society: “They keep talking this tripe of having the best constitution in world and yet every second of every day it is violated by male domination over women and abuse of children”. In health, problems are entrenched, he says, and need to be fixed from the ground up: “The health system doesn’t function because they have appointed incompetent managers. The managers don’t manage, many nurses don’t give a damn, the doctors are not there, and so things just don’t get done at regional level and district level.”

Coovadia’s initial focus on malnutrition and childhood diseases like measles switched to HIV/AIDS during the late 1980s. In 1994, Coovadia became involved in a UNAIDS-sponsored study of mother-to-child transmission in Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa to follow up US and French trials,

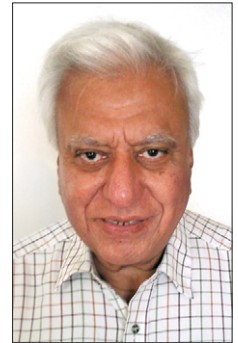
which showed that antiretrovirals could reduce prevalence by 66%. Critics, writing in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, charged that it was unethical not to give participants antiretrovirals. Coovadia defended the use of placebos but said the experience was a valuable lesson in research ethics. He built up a powerful research team at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine and his group was the first to challenge conventional wisdom with a study indicating that transmission of HIV from mother to child could be significantly reduced through exclusive breastfeeding and that the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding outweighed the risks in poor sub-Saharan African nations.

Coovadia was co-chair of the International AIDS Conference in Durban, in 2000, when Mbeki’s denialism and refusal to provide antiretrovirals came under attack. He refused then Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang’s demands for right of reply at the closing plenary. She warned that there would be repercussions once his “international friends” had left. “And that was the end of all contact for years”, he recalls. He still bristles at her insinuation that he was not a loyal South African, even though Mandela had awarded him the Star of South Africa for Contributions to Democracy and Health in 1999. Salim Abdool Karim, Director of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, said one of Coovadia’s strengths is his insistence on the truth: “He will call it as he sees it. He is not scared to be unpopular and he is not scared to say something against those in power if that’s what it takes. But he does so in a way that is supported by evidence and data. He doesn’t make wild accusations.”

At this year’s International AIDS Society Conference in Cape Town in July, Coovadia—the local co-chair—warned that leaders must still be held accountable for failing to honour commitments to provide antiretrovirals, but the political acrimony of previous years was gone as he shared platforms with the Deputy President, Treatment Action Campaign activists, and Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi.

Since 2001, Coovadia has been the Victor Daitz Chair in HIV/AIDS Research at the University of Natal, and maintains his prolific research output. The *Paediatrics and Child Health* textbook he co-edited remains staple reading for South African medical students. Gray, who has “bantered” with Coovadia over her work with HIV positive mothers in Soweto, where infant formula is the norm, unlike Coovadia’s experience with breastfeeding mothers in KwaZulu-Natal, says his contribution is huge: “He is an impeccable scientist, lots of integrity. He is a great leader in child health in South Africa, Africa, and internationally. He is an icon.”

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See [Series](#) page 817

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