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# Hoosen (Jerry) M. Coovadia (1940–2023): Caring paediatrician, excellent scientist, courageous human rights activist and visionary leader

On 4 October 2023 the world mourned the loss of a caring paediatrician, an excellent scientist, a courageous human rights activist and a visionary leader. Professor Hoosen Mohamed Coovadia, fondly known as 'Jerry', was an exceptional and rare human being who blessed many lives – as a mentor, role model, colleague, and dear friend. He was an extraordinary human being who stood steadfast and unwavering for truth and justice, regardless of personal sacrifices and consequences. We have said goodbye to one of South Africa's greatest scientists and staunchest proponents of democracy and equality. He stood well above others in his integrity and unwavering commitment to a just world.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said in a statement:

*Our nation's loss will be felt globally, but we can take pride at and comfort from the emergence of a giant of science and an icon of compassion and resilience from our country.*

Like many whose lives Professor Coovadia touched, one was left deeply impressed by his incisive and profound contributions to both scientific and political discussions. He was an unparalleled intellect and leader who never compromised on anything less than world-class excellence. As an academic, he always had so much to share, teach and instil in eager, young minds and the number of outstanding medical students, paediatricians and scientists he nurtured and graduated are a testament to his life-changing mentorship and leadership. His passion for science and the way he effortlessly transformed complex medical challenges into a series of achievable research questions was truly inspiring. His inimitable curiosity and systematic approach did not compromise on the robust rigour that he applied equally in the way he cared for his young patients. As a mentor, he set a high bar, repeatedly pushing the boundaries of knowledge and expecting no less from his mentees. He was consistently magnanimous with his guidance and generous with the time he committed to nurturing, advising and supporting each and every one of his students. I was truly blessed and privileged to have him as my mentor for almost 35 years and I owe much of my success to his wise guidance and to being an inspiring role model on how to serve humanity with humility and equanimity. The respect and warmth he gave to his students resulted in lifelong friendships that extended to their entire families and often included multiple generations. His textbook *Coovadia's Paediatrics and Child Health*, now in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition, is the go-to reference for thousands of medical students and paediatricians across Africa and in other low- and middle-income countries.

His passion for science was matched by his passion for freedom and justice for all. His prominent role in the struggle for a democratic South Africa and his principled stand against non-racialism were consistent with his character and with his always speaking to truth and doing what was morally the right thing to do.

Although he started his medical studies at the University of Natal in South Africa, he completed his medical degree in the 1960s at Grant Medical College in Bombay, where he met his lifelong partner and wife-to-be, Dr Zubie Hamed. Upon his return to South Africa following graduation, he worked at King Edward VIII Hospital and subsequently joined the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Natal Medical School, where he specialised in paediatrics and became a Fellow of the College of Paediatricians of the College of Medicine of South Africa in 1971. In 1974, he obtained his MSc in Immunology from the University of Birmingham in the UK.

It was his time at Grant College that was pivotal in terms of his political conscientisation. He was instrumental in forming a political body called the South African Students Association, which invited members of the African National Congress in exile, such as Dr Dadoo, to address them on freedom and the anti-apartheid movement. He was one of the key figures to rekindle the Natal Indian Congress in the 1970s and was subsequently elected its vice-president. In the 1980s, he was a key player in launching the United Democratic Front.

Politics and health were two sides of the same coin for him. He fought for equitable health care and was a founding member of the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA), which was set up by progressive doctors following the Medical Association of South Africa's complacency regarding the doctors who were complicit in Steve Biko's death.

He was formidable as an anti-apartheid activist – strategic and penetrating in his analysis of the tactics needed to advance the struggle for freedom. In the 1980s, he was part of a delegation to meet the African National Congress in Lusaka prior to the organisation being unbanned. He took part in the preliminary discussions and negotiations at the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). As a result of his political activities, Professor Coovadia was targeted by the apartheid regime – his house was bombed during the political turbulence in the early 1990s, but he remained steadfast and undeterred from his commitment to a just and free South Africa.

Professor Coovadia's research contributions on the effects of poverty and malnutrition on child survival and development included the definitive work on nephrosis in black South African children, malnutrition and immunity, and measles. His research focus pivoted to paediatric HIV/AIDS in the early 1990s as he started to witness the unfolding tragedy in his paediatric wards at King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban. His particular focus was the transmission of the virus from mother to child, a field in which he challenged conventional wisdom about breastfeeding and became nationally and internationally recognised for his groundbreaking research on saving babies' lives by reducing HIV transmission from mother to child through exclusive breastfeeding.



Source: CAPRISA archives

Professor Jerry Coovadia fought for equitable health care and was a founding member of the National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA).

He was appointed Chairperson of the inaugural Scientific Advisory Board to the Ministry of Health's National AIDS Programme established post-1994 and he served as the first international co-chair of the US National Institutes of Health Global Paediatric Network for AIDS research. His international stature in HIV/AIDS led to him being appointed as Chairperson of the XIII<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference in Durban in July 2000. This conference is widely credited for expediting access to AIDS treatment in poor countries. It brought him national and international accolades but also resulted in clashes with some prominent government figures at the time, especially President Mbeki and Minister Tshabalala-Msimang. He undauntedly stood up to these AIDS denialists. Despite being vilified by some for his clashes with the President, Professor Coovadia persisted in speaking truth to power regardless, never faltering.

His leadership role in numerous national and global expert committees on health following his retirement as Chair of the Department of Paediatrics, including as President of the South African Medical Association, is a testament to his invaluable academic contributions. He was appointed the Victor Daitz Chair in HIV/AIDS Research, and Director of Biomedical Science at the Centre for HIV/AIDS Networking (HIVAN) at the Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, University of Natal, and thereafter to the leadership of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA). In 2010, he was appointed to the government's National Planning Commission to guide the development plan of South Africa. He spoke extensively on South Africa's need for a National Health Service, with National Health Insurance as a stepping stone, being built on the foundations of primary health care. An unfinished dream he had was of restoring the abandoned Addington Children's Hospital on the Durban beachfront to the KwaZulu-Natal Children's Hospital of Excellence for the care of children with special health needs.

Professor Coovadia was the recipient of numerous distinguished and prestigious accolades and awards including the Star of South Africa and the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights for his contributions to democracy and health. He received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Durban-Westville, Witwatersrand and Cape Town. He is one of a handful of South Africans to be elected as a Foreign Member of the US National Academy of Medicine. He received the

Science-for-Society Gold Medal award of the Academy of Science of South Africa; the American Association for the Advancement of Science Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award; a Lifetime Achievement Award during the HIV Congress in India; a Silver Medal for Excellence in Research (Medical Research Council); the SAMRC Presidential Award; the International Association of Physicians in AIDS and Care Award; and the Heroes in Medicine Award in Toronto, Canada.

Professor Coovadia was a patriot; he was deeply committed to a better and more just South Africa. He was a fierce critic of maladministration and corruption in government and was vocal about how he felt that the struggle for a free and just country was being jeopardised by greed and incompetence. A few years ago, he developed weakness in both limbs, which progressively deteriorated until he became wheelchair-bound. Notwithstanding his health challenges, he remained in good spirits and those who visited him benefitted from engaging in conversations on life, literature, global politics and new developments in science.

In an [interview](#) with the Academy of Science of South Africa in 2017, when asked what people don't know about him, Coovadia responded: "Despite some corroding bourgeois proclivities, I remain at heart and in mind, an adherent of equity and fairness in all things meaningful — justice for the poor and the elimination of poverty."

We pay tribute to his wife Dr Zubie Hamed, son Professor Imraan Coovadia and daughter Dr Anushka Coovadia, their children and his extended family for their support during his many years spent fighting for social justice and establishing a strong science base in South Africa.

We have lost a visionary who remained forever hopeful that South Africa would be a great country, one who cared for the poor and most vulnerable, notably its children. We have lost an icon in the world of medical science, unwavering in his commitment to saving lives through his research. We have lost a giant who towered above others in his steadfast and unwavering integrity and compassion. His demise has left us with a deep sense of loss, but his legacy lives on in all the lives he touched.

*Hamba kahle* Professor Jerry Coovadia.