

# World remembers gentle, determined HIV scientist

● *Gita Ramjee, who died from Covid-19 complications, was a leader in microbicide research*

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Science & Health Writer

Researchers from around the world have paid tribute to renowned SA HIV researcher Gita Ramjee, who died from Covid-19-related complications at a Durban hospital on Tuesday.

Ramjee was fundamental to the global effort to develop microbicides – vaginal gels or creams designed to protect women from HIV – and deeply involved in vaccine research.

“She was involved in almost every major HIV prevention trial on microbicide ... and defined her niche in developing technologies for women,” said Salim Abdool Karim, director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA.

Karim was head of the SA Medical Research Council (MRC) when Ramjee joined in 1996. She rose through its ranks to become director of its HIV prevention research unit before taking up the role of chief scientist at the Aurum Institute.

Ramjee’s work focused on women in KwaZulu-Natal.

She was the recipient of numerous awards for her research, including the Outstanding Female Scientist award of the European Development Clinical Trials Partnership, the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2012 International Microbicide Conference, and the 2017 MRC Scientific Merit Award gold medal.

Gentle of manner and dedicated to the pursuit of science,



Ramjee’s contribution to the field of HIV prevention was acknowledged by researchers globally on Wednesday.

She was acutely aware of the forces that shape women’s lives, and how this affected the prevention tools being developed by

**Health hero:**  
Gita Ramjee, who died on Tuesday as a result of Covid-19 complications was known for her gentle manner and her belief in health as a fundamental human right. She was a shining light in microbicide research, as well as HIV vaccine trials in SA.  
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scientists. “She tried to address the whole ecosystem that makes women vulnerable, from the biological to the political,”

said MRC president Glenda Gray.

Ramjee was among the first SA scientists working in the field of microbicides and was involved in every study that took place in SA, either conducting the research herself or advising other scientists, said Gray.

## CLINICAL TRIALS

The field was littered with disappointments, as product after product failed to protect women from HIV infection, but her work contributed to understanding the factors that placed women at risk, from the microbiome of the vagina to the nature of their relationships, said Gray.

Ramjee’s expertise in international clinical trials took her beyond microbicide research, and she was also integrally involved in HIV vaccine trials in this country.

“Gita was well known for the efficiency and quality of the trials that were run at her unit, and for the insights that she brought to the research,” said Richard Hayes, professor of epidemiology & international health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, where she held an honorary professorship.

Aurum Institute CEO Gavin Churchyard said Ramjee firmly believed in health as a fundamental human right.

“The world has lost a bold and compassionate leader in the response to HIV,” he said.

Ramjee is survived by her husband and two sons.

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