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NATION

Scientist's coronavirus death 'a huge blow'

LYSE COMINS

THE death of Dr Gita Ramjee, one of South Africa's leading scientists, from coronavirus (Covid-19) complications has been described as a huge blow to the entire health-care sector.

Hers was one of the five deaths that have occurred in South Africa as a result of Covid-19.

Ramjee, of Westville, had previously served as a chief specialist scientist and director of the SA Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) HIV Prevention Research Unit. She contributed substantially to advancing HIV prevention science among women in South Africa.

It is believed she had recently travelled to London, where both her sons live, and had taken ill on her return.

She died at a Durban hospital. Her cremation took place on Tuesday.

Her husband, a pharmacist, is in isolation.

Tributes have since poured in for Ramjee from around the world.

Deputy President David Mabuza, in his capacity as chairperson of the SA National Aids Council (Sanac), said Ramjee was renowned for her work in finding HIV prevention methods that were conducive to the lifestyles, circumstances and perceived risk factors that South African women faced, as well as in an attempt to find an effective HIV vaccine.

Gita Ramjee

"The passing of Professor Ramjee comes as a huge blow to the entirety of the health-care sector and the global fight against HIV/Aids. In her, we have indeed lost a champion in the fight against the HIV epidemic, ironically at the hands of this global pandemic.

"In her honour, we should heed the call to flatten the curve by strengthening our responses to this global pandemic as well as continue the fight to achieve zero new HIV infections. We would like to convey our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Professor Ramjee, as well as to the medical research community," Mabuza said.

SAMRC president and chief executive Professor Glenda Gray said in a message to colleagues: "We are deeply saddened to inform you of the tragic passing of Prof Gita Ramjee in hospital today. Prof Ramjee died of Covid-19-related complications. We are sincerely grateful for her contributions to HIV prevention and for the role she played in our lives. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family. May her soul rest in peace."

Professor Salim Karim, director of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa, said the country had lost a leading scientist.

"She had devoted many years of selfless service to research to address the Aids problem in our country," Karim said.

He said he had previously worked with her at the Medical Research Council and she was initially involved in paediatric kidney research.

"I recruited her back in 1994 and

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HEALTH

‘World has lost a bold leader in HIV response’

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brought her in, and she very rapidly became one of our top researchers and became like my deputy for a while.

“When I left the MRC she took over the HIV research unit I was running, and we maintained a close personal friendship,” Karim said.

At the time of her death, Ramjee was the chief scientific officer for HIV Prevention at health impact organisation, the Aurum Institute.

Group chief executive Gavin Churchyard said: “The world has lost a bold and compassionate leader in the response to HIV.

“Gita firmly believed in health as a fundamental human right. Her groundbreaking research in HIV prevention contributed to the global response to HIV and Aids.

“Our thoughts during this difficult time are with her family, colleagues and the many people her life and work touched.”

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