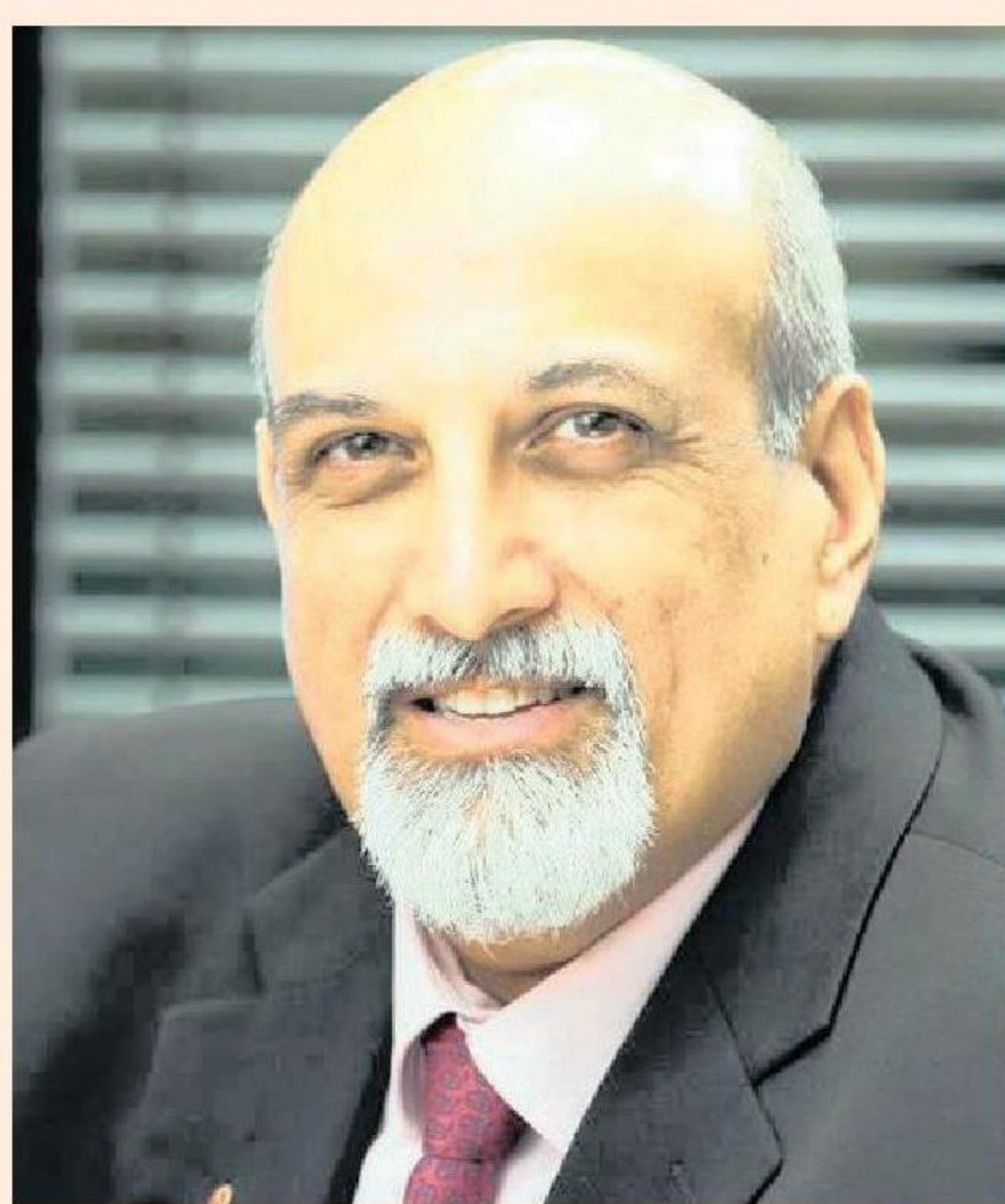


■ FUNDING

Karim dismisses R944m claim as nonsense, fake



Bill Gates



Professor Salim Abdool Karim

LYSE COMINS

SOUTH African medical scientist Professor Salim Abdool Karim yesterday dismissed “fake news” posts that had gone viral on social media, alleging he had received R944 million in funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as “nonsense”.

Abdool Karim, an epidemiologist and infectious diseases specialist who serves on the ministerial committee that advises President Cyril Ramaphosa on the country’s Covid-19 response and heads up the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, said he became aware of the posts after one had been sent to him.

The original post was published on Twitter by an account called critical.observer using the handle @crit_observer, which Twitter has subsequently temporarily restricted claiming there had been “some unusual activity” from the account.

“Maybe @CyrilRamaphosa is following the wrong experts: @ProfAbdoolKarim received min \$50 890 548 (R944 million) from Gates (2006-2016, to CAPRISA & MRC) + sits on board of GatesFoundation (for \$???). Who believes to receive neutrality? Check links! -twitter.com/crit_observer/”.

The link connects to another tweet which alleges the funding was supplied for “vaccine strategies and policy decisions”.

The posts collectively received just 42 retweets and 26 likes but appear to have been widely disseminated on other platforms such as WhatsApp, prompting former Durban deputy mayor Logie Naidoo to post on Facebook what he said was Abdool Karim’s “official response” to the posts.

The post said: “To people, especially the Muslim community, that are spreading fake news about Prof Karim. This is his direct response: “This fake news about me receiving money from Gates is spreading within the Muslim community. It is from a fake news Twitter account that was closed by twitter for spreading other fake news as well. I have served on the Gates Foundation Scientific Advisory Board for about 10 years. I also chair the WHO Scientific Committee on

HIV and lots of other committee (sic). Since when is it wrong to advise these bodies? Because I am an adviser to the Gates Foundation, I do not have grant funding from Gates. Please convey the truth to help stop the fake news.’ If you spread fake news and conspiracy theories, please unfriend me, I have no patience for this.”

Abdool Karim confirmed yesterday that he had written the above response. “If you go into Twitter you will see the original post has been shut down as a source of multiple fake news stories, not just this one. It has obviously been set up to generate this kind of nonsense,” he said.

“Several people started sending it to me, asking if I knew about the fake news that was going around? I sent a short note to one of them saying please don’t send me this stuff, it’s all nonsense, here’s the facts. I didn’t even think it was worthy of a response,” he said.

“Put simply, I was an adviser to many organisations. I chair the World Health Organization scientific committee on HIV and the UNAids Scientific expert panel,” he said.

Asked whether he, Caprisa or the MRC had in fact received any funding from the Bill and Melissa Gates Foundation, Abdool Karim said: “Even if I did, what has that got to do with Covid-19? My view is whether I received money or not is irrelevant to Covid-19. It doesn’t impact on my objectivity or my scientific credibility on the issue of Covid-19, in any way. Bill Gates and what he is doing has got nothing to do with what I do with regard to the virus or whether I received money or not.”

When pressed further to confirm whether or not he had received funding, he declined to answer.

“I am not answering the question because I don’t feel I should justify whether I received funding from the foundation or not. That should be irrelevant to my scientific stature and what I say about Covid-19,” he said.

He said there were some people who were opposed to Gates for his criticism of the US President Donald Trump’s handling of the pandemic.

“I am not going to fall into that trap. It is irrelevant whether I received money or not,” Abdool Karim said.

BILL GATES FUNDING DISCLOSURE

A CURSORY on-line search reveals that South African medical research institutions and academics, including the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) and the Medical Research Council (MRC), have received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation over the years.

A post on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation website reveals that in July 2016 an amount of \$1 233 758 (R22.575 million) was provided to Caprisa in Durban, “to develop practical approaches to amplifying the voice, and incorporating the perspective, of African thought-leaders and stakeholders in global health research and development”. The topic of the research was cited as “Discovery and Translational Sciences, Malaria” as part of the Global Health programme.

Caprisa’s website highlights the awarding of a grant of \$402 000 in August 2016 to one of its scientists, Professor Jerome Singh, “to develop and articulate African (“Southern”) perspectives on the ethical, legal, social and cultural implications of synthetic biology, and in particular, gene drive applications.

The website also has a record of seven grants issued to the MRC totalling more than \$19m, for a range of projects, including for “the national TB prevalence survey and to understand associated health-seeking behaviour, so that appropriate interventions can be developed to reduce TB incidence and mortality”, to funding for HIV/Aids “to support an international conference on vaginal microbicides for the prevention of HIV and STI”.

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