

Covid-19 committee at odds

DEMAND FOR PROBE: HEALTH DEPARTMENT BIGWIG SAYS SCIENTIST MAKES FALSE ALLEGATIONS

»→ **Boffins asked to help response to pandemic say they are not being taken seriously.**

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Liezl Human and Nathan Geffen
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The health department's acting director-general, Dr Anban Pillay, has requested an investigation into the conduct of Medical Research Council (MRC) president Dr Glenda Gray, claiming she has "made a number of false allegations against government".

A letter, dated 21 May, was addressed to MRC chair Professor Johnny Mahlangu.

It states that allegations Gray recently made in the media "are damaging to government's response to Covid-19".

"These media statements cause confusion ... and are likely to erode public support for behaviour change."

Pillay said he had received calls about Gray's conduct as president of the MRC on other matters.

"I therefore recommend that the board investigates [her] conduct ... given the harm it has caused to South Africa's Covid-19 response," wrote Pillay.

Health department spokeswoman Lwazi Manzi did not respond to queries or answer calls by the time of going to press.

Neither Mahlangu nor Gray wished to comment.

Professor Linda-Gail Bekker, a leading medical researcher based at the Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation, has come out in support of Gray, describing her as a "national treasure".

She said Gray had raised im-

portant issues for the "common good" and in the "best interest of the country".

The response should not be a witch-hunt, she said, but a discussion, so the government, including the Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize, can find the best way to respond to the epidemic.

She emphasised that scientists must have the freedom to speak their minds.

Meanwhile, another top scientist and member Mkhize's Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee (MAC), has accused the government of not consulting the country's top scientists on lockdown regulations.

Professor Francois Venter is

one of 51 academics who publicly pledged their support to Gray.

Following comments by Gray and Mkhize, News24 contacted most of the 51-member MAC.

The majority declined to comment, or did not respond by the time of going to press.

Last Saturday, a group of scientists, academics and policy experts condemned the threat against Gray "for expressing her opinion in public" which, they said, "is totally out of step with the public pronouncements made by the president, welcoming criticism".

They said: "We uphold the right to academic freedom of speech, and call on the South African government to engage openly with al-

ternate views, and for all of us to urgently work towards constructive solutions regarding policy, in the interests of the country."

Venter, who is the deputy executive director of the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute, said the government did not ask the MAC's scientists for advice on some of the regulations.

He serves on the MAC alongside Gray and chair Professor Salim Abdool Karim.

He said there was frustration among some scientists as "some of the best scientists aren't actually being asked [about] their debate [among themselves], their opinions or ... being taken seriously."

"The bottom line is, I think, we all supported a science and epidemiological approach, we're just not sure who is providing that advice at this point because it's not the main MAC."

Venter added some of the issues the MAC provided advice on were around mask-wearing and intensive care protocols, adding "amazing work" had been done by the team.

"But it certainly wasn't advice on regulations and it certainly wasn't advice on which services to withhold ... how to shut down the health system or with lockdown mechanisms."

– *GroundUp*, with additional reporting by *News24 Wire*