

Salim S Abdool Karim, SA's leading Covid expert, shares his experiences of vaccine hesitancy and aspects of the disinformation surrounding Covid-19 in this extract from his new book, 'Standing Up For Science'

How I became a target for being a Covid myth-buster

Vaccine hesitancy was not new in South Africa. Small groups of individuals have taken a position against vaccinating their children and some have promoted anti-vaccine sentiment. In Covid-19, vaccine hesitancy grew markedly, with estimates ranging from 8% to 24% of the population at different times during the pandemic.

Unlike the situation in the US, where vaccine hesitancy is politically partisan, this was not the case in South Africa. With somewhere between one in four and one in 10 people being vaccine hesitant across the political spectrum, this was a different problem from the one the country had in the past.

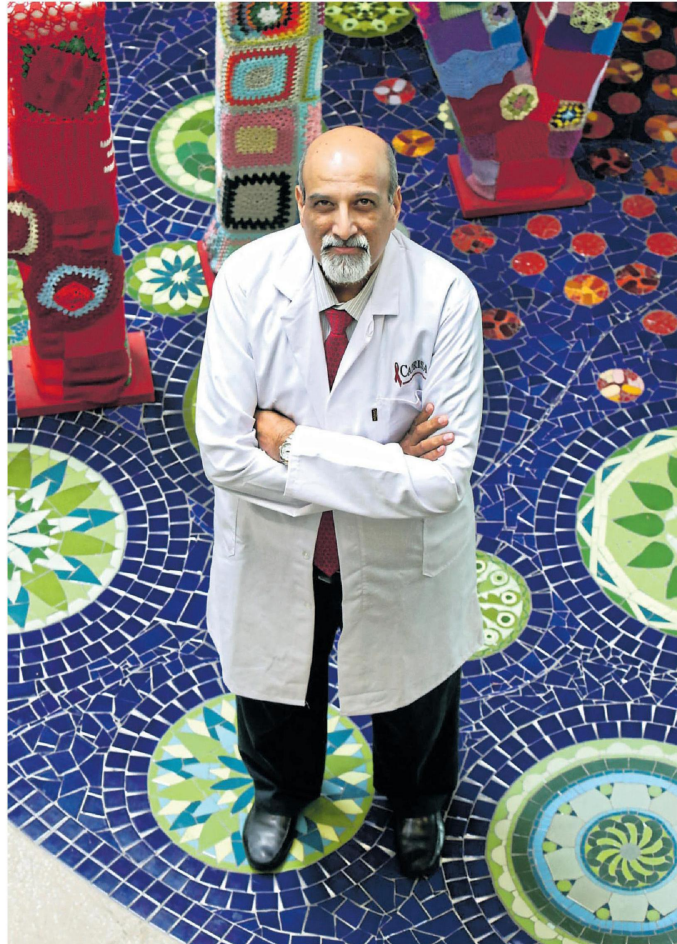
Vaccine hesitancy took many different paths in South Africa, but social media was a common factor. Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook were the main social media platforms used to disseminate incorrect information about Covid-19 vaccines. Given their role in disseminating disinformation in the name of free speech, social media platforms have some culpability for the consequences. Yes, we do need to actively protect free speech, but I have difficulty categorising disinformation as free speech. There is a fine line when free speech leads to harm to others, including death when not vaccinated. In anticipation that social media will play a major role in disseminating important information during the next pandemic, some action is required as soon as possible to address the problem of disinformation on social media.

A further disinformation challenge reared its ugly head every now and then, namely, the origins of the virus. I was very familiar with this issue, having spent a lot of time countering the origins of disinformation and the consequences of Operation Infektion. Several people were sending me videos of interviews on the origins issue such as right-wing US television broadcasts where individuals with little knowledge of virology and the origins of past epidemics espoused grand theories about how Chinese scientists made the virus in collaboration with American researchers doing gain-of-function research.

I became concerned when I learned that a survey conducted in 15 African countries on behalf of the Africa CDC found that 27% of the over 1,000 respondents believed that SARS-CoV-2 was man-made. It perpetuated the narrative that the West was responsible for problems in Africa, absolving local leaders for failing to act in limiting the spread of the virus. This was déjà vu. I had had to refute very similar arguments in HIV more than two decades before.

Exasperated by the irrepressible flow of misinformation, I agreed to an interview with Sally Burdett on eNCA on January 13 in an attempt to help dispel some of the myths about Covid-19 generally, and vaccines in particular. I made a distinction between three types of vaccine hesitancy: those individuals who are uninformed; those who are misinformed; and those who are decidedly anti-vaccination and are often responsible for spreading misinformation, helped along by social media.

Again, I used the opportunity of a live television broadcast to remind everyone of their responsibility to provide the most accurate



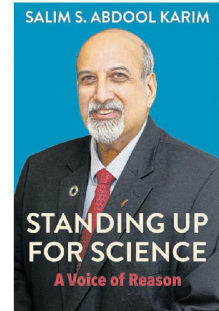
Professor Salim Abdool Karim, who sees himself as an ambassador of science. Picture: Jackie Clausen

information possible about vaccines. I said: "They must make up their own minds (about getting vaccinated), but if they are not sure, it's our job, all of us – the media, the public, community-based organisations, government and private sector – to ensure that we promote the most accurate information on vaccines for people to make an informed decision. Every one of us who understands vaccines has to talk to others about it. We are all agents of change and can play that role."

It was essentially the same message I had given shortly before in a student webinar. At the close of my keynote address, I urged students to remember their role as ambassadors of truth and science in the context of misinformation. As custodians and generators of knowledge, I said,

they should all be challenging fake news and conspiracy theories when they encountered them. If they are not challenged, social media, which amplifies mistruths, will ensure that such falsehoods grow and spread to the detriment of public trust in science.

In taking up this challenge of repudiating disinformation on denialism, vaccines, viral origins, fake treatments and others, I had become a target. I was regularly challenging myths and conspiracy theories in the broadcast media, press interviews, webinars and my writings. This led to a substantial backlash against me – attacks, insults, "lock-him-up" tweets and death threats. I knew that I would be a prime target of the anti-vaxxers because of my high profile. But the attacks went deeper. They targeted my wife and



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daughters too. Quarraisha was included in a three-part article attacking me. Safura's job was under threat when her boss was called by a research funder concerned about her role in Covid-19 vaccines. Aisha was receiving hate mail and hate tweets. I had never been so naive as to think that the opposition would make it a clean fight. Fortunately, my family members never bent under the threats and pressure. They remained steadfast in their resolve. They were not going to stop standing up for science.

I personally found that the way to deal with the attacks, political machinations and misinformation during the pandemic was to understand their context and source – and simply to stick to the science. When faced with this situation, ask yourself: What is the evidence? What does it say? How does it say it? Should we have confidence in it? My personal challenge when it came to public communication was often: How do I promote an evidence-based approach without inflaming controversy? I tried to adopt this approach with ivermectin and vaccines but paid the price of severe opprobrium from some quarters. Naturally, I would do the same again. I also took this line on the issue of schools reopening and again I paid the price in the currency of political mudslinging. South Africa is fortunate to have many scientists who are skilled in communication and who have taken up the challenge of refuting myths and disinformation. We need to go one step further. Every one of us, I believe, can be a myth-buster and an ambassador of science.

* This is an extract from 'Standing Up For Science' by Salim S Abdool Karim, published by Pan Macmillan and in bookstores from tomorrow.