

SA professor enters ranks of Royal elite

Salim Abdool Karim joins Newton, Hawking and Einstein as a member of an extraordinary society

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Thirty-one years ago, Salim Abdool Karim told his wife that he wanted to become a fellow of the Royal Society.

This was after he was blown away by a presentation made by his lecturer about the Royal Society while Karim was studying at the London School of Economics.

Now an expert in HIV prevention and treatment, he says one of the things the lecturer spoke about then was that when you become a fellow of the Royal Society you drop all the qualifications after your name and simply write “FRS” (Fellow of the Royal Society).

“When you write FRS nobody would want to bother you with what

your qualifications are, because that is more valuable than any qualification. I was fascinated by that idea,” he says.

Last Friday, in London, Professor Karim’s long-held dream came true when he was inducted as a fellow of the 359-year-old Royal Society.

The society is a fellowship of the world’s most eminent scientists and is the oldest scientific academy with a mission to recognise, promote, and support excellence in science.

According to its website, it has about 1600 fellows, and each year about 52 fellows are elected from a group of around 700 candidates. Some of its late fellows include Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking.

Karim told the *Mail & Guardian* this week that, while in high school, one of his idols was English math-



Advocacy: Aids researcher and epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim, pictured here at Durban’s 2018 March For Science, is the latest South African fellow of the elite Royal Society of scientists. Photo: Rajesh Jantilal/AFP

ematician Sir Isaac Newton. He says he used to read his theories from front to back, because he considered Newton as the “ultimate scientist, and my true idol”.

And today his signature is in the same book as his idol, who was also a fellow of the Royal Society.

“The main thing about the induction is that you get to sign the book. This is the book that was first signed by Sir Christopher Wren in 1660. It’s the exact same book, and it has in it the signature of Sir Isaac Newton, it has Einstein’s signature; it has all of

these icons of science, their signatures are in that book,” says Karim. “When I went up to the stage and opened the book, and signed the book, adding my name to the list of the most prestigious scientists of all time, the sort of enormity of it dawned on me and I was in almost disbelief. [I asked myself,] ‘Is this really happening?’ because I have been wishing for this for almost 30 years.”

Karim is a world-renowned scientist and researcher for his work in and contribution to HIV prevention and treatment.

He is also the chair of the UNAids scientific expert panel and chair of the World Health Organisation’s strategic and technical advisory group on HIV. Among his accolades, he has also received the most prestigious scientific award in Africa, the Kwame Nkrumah Continental Scientific Award.

Karim told the *M&G* that when two of his colleagues from the United Kingdom nominated him to become a Royal Society Fellow he thought he was still too young, and it was too early for him to get in.

As a result, when he received an email informing him that he had made it as a fellow, he says he was in

disbelief as he read it.

“I sat there for like a whole minute reading it, and the third time I jumped out of the chair and went to my wife and said, ‘Hey, I got the Royal Society, I got the Royal Society,’” he laughs.

Karim hopes that being inducted as a Royal Society fellow will send a message that South African science is world class, especially because there is a belief that great science is only done in the United States, the UK and Europe, and that South Africans do not produce high-quality science.

“We are great scientists in the same way that the others are. We sometimes impose on ourselves an inferiority complex that we are not as good as everybody else.

“I hope that this breaks that myth and says to every young person in science today that we can walk shoulder to shoulder with the giants in science anywhere in the world. That’s the power we have in this country. And if that’s all it does, I will be happy,” he says.

Karim is the sixth South African to become a Royal Society fellow. Others include Dr Bernie Fanaroff of the Square Kilometre Array and mathematician Professor George Ellis.