

Karim pays tribute to a 'labour of love'

● *Minister's top coronavirus adviser steps down* ● *Intention was to serve only for a year*

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Health minister Zweli Mkhize's top coronavirus adviser, Salim Abdool Karim, has stepped down, saying that he needs to devote his attention to his academic commitments and HIV research.

Karim is an internationally respected scientist who heads the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where he holds the position of pro-vice-chancellor for research. He also holds positions at the universities of Columbia, Cornell and Harvard.

Mkhize appointed Karim as chair of his ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19 on March 23 2020, a little less than three weeks after SA's first Covid-19 case was confirmed. Karim was then named co-chair of a revised advisory committee constituted in September.

Karim wrote to the minister in February saying he would be stepping down from the committee on the one-year anniversary of his term and would also relinquish his role on the ministerial advisory committee on

Covid-19 vaccines, which is chaired by Barry Schoub.

The ministerial advisory committee on Covid-19 was formed to provide scientific guidance to Mkhize and has produced dozens of advisories on subjects ranging from mask-wearing to imposing restrictions aimed at slowing transmission of the disease.

These advisories have not necessarily been followed to the letter, as the government has weighed up other considerations when it has imposed restrictions on trade, travel and social interactions. But none of the guidance has been entirely rejected, said Karim.

"If we are going to be advisers, we have to recognise there are others giving advice to the government too. We consider only health, but the government has to consider other aspects too," he said.

In his letter of resignation, Karim paid tribute to his fellow scientists on the committee.

"It is a labour of love, grappling with an avalanche of new information daily – sifting through fact, fiction, conspiracy

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Karim pays tribute to his colleagues' labour of love

theories, assumptions and projections to provide science-based advice in the midst of substantial uncertainty," he said.

Karim said Mkhize had accepted his request to step down and he will now turn his attention to his research on broadly neutralising antibodies for HIV prevention. These novel antibodies have the potential to make an important contribution to bringing the global HIV prevention effort back on track.

Committee co-chair Marian Jacobs, emeritus professor of child health at the University of Cape Town, remains in her position, he said.

Mkhize paid tribute to Karim, saying he had provided exceptional stewardship in one of humanity's greatest crises.

"He has become a trusted figure for so many South Africans, who have grown accustomed to his singular ability to explain complex scientific concepts in simple terms that all of us can

understand," the minister said in a statement.

"Prof Abdool Karim has led a team of top scientists who have been of support to the department as a whole, the national coronavirus command council and the cabinet. [His] acumen and skill are not lost to us as he continues to pursue his scientific research and innovation to address public health threats that plague SA and the globe."

Mkhize said Koleka Mlisana, head of academic affairs, research and quality assurance at the National Health Laboratory Service, will step into the

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position. She currently heads the ministerial advisory committee's subcommittee on pathology and laboratory issues. Her appointment will preserve institutional knowledge and ensure continuity in the leadership of the committee, he said.

The minister also announced that the committee will be reconstituted to reflect the shifting nature of the pandemic.

"A recomposition ... will be necessary to respond to the current evolutions in virology and epidemiology related to Covid-19. The recomposition will see a strengthening of the [ministerial advisory committee] in the fields of virology, bio-informatics and phylogenetics; mathematical modelling; pharmacy; and social behavioural change."

The names of the full ministerial advisory committee would be announced when the appointment processes had been concluded, he said.

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