

# Covid not behind us, warn experts as Prof Salim Abdool Karim launches new book

**World's leading minds laud Karim for his publication that straddles science and politics**

**SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER**

At a gathering to mark the release of renowned infectious diseases epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim's book *Standing Up for Science: A Voice of Reason*, leading global Covid-19 experts warned the debilitating infection is not behind us and the world must brace for future pandemics.

Karim's work, published by Pan Macmillan South Africa, was launched at Durban's International Convention Centre on Monday and brought together scientific heavyweights from around the world.

Part of the discussion panel that unpacked the book and the pandemic were Prof Cate Hankins of Canada's McGill University, Prof Pete Piot, EU chief adviser on epidemics, Prof Jeremy Farrar, chief scientist at the World Health Organisation and ambassador John Nkengasong, US global Aids coordinator and special representative for health diplomacy.

Karim, the director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) in Durban, described his book as a "labour of love" and spoke about the lessons learnt from dealing with the pandemic, which he has detailed in the work.

"Those of you who thought there isn't going to be another pandemic, bad news. There is going to be another pandemic, it's just a matter of time.

"We are in the midst of a cholera epidemic, in South Africa, Malawi and Haiti. In South Africa we have 43 deaths from a disease we should not have a single death from.

"We have to take the lessons from measles, HIV, TB and Covid-19, we have to be prepared to tackle the next set of pandemics," said Karim.

Speaking in his personal capacity, Farrar described Karim's book as "remarkable".

He said it was critical that Karim captured his experience now.

"This pandemic will be debated in a 100 years from now along with all the controversies. Therefore contemporary history writing is important, otherwise history will be written in the future by people who may not have been there and/or experienced it.

"Covid is not going away, this is not a temporary human infection. It's with us forever. While there are optimistic scenarios, there is a non-zero chance that less optimistic scenarios may play out.

"I think as scientists we need to say there is a non-zero chance of a rosy outcome, we are not where we need to be in terms of equity, diagnostics, therapeutics and we don't yet have vaccines that block transmission and until we have those I don't think we can rest and say that Covid is behind us.

"Covid will return in some form or the other," said Farrar. Peter Piot, EU chief adviser on epidemics, said: "It's important to tell the story when it's still in our minds and not completely forgotten.

"As societies and individuals we hope to forget as soon as possible, our bad experiences. We are in that phase worldwide that Covid is over and we can go back to normal.

"There is no going back to normal, it's going forward to a new normal. I understand the psychologically, but it's very dangerous. There will be other pandemics."

Piot said the book is a "must-read to understand the complex and vital interaction between science and politics by one of the world's thought leaders in science and health, sharing precious, first-hand experience during the pandemic".

Karim became the voice of reason for millions of South Africans when he headed the

Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee.

"They say that when you undertake a project like this, there is a certain level of perseverance that is required," said Karim.

"In providing scientific advice during Covid-19, you had to have perseverance in big bundles because every step was a whole series of challenges you had to grapple with.

"You had to provide scientific advice often in the absence of clear, rigorous scientific data. "You had to draw on past experiences and from other pandemics and cobble together evidence that might be helpful.

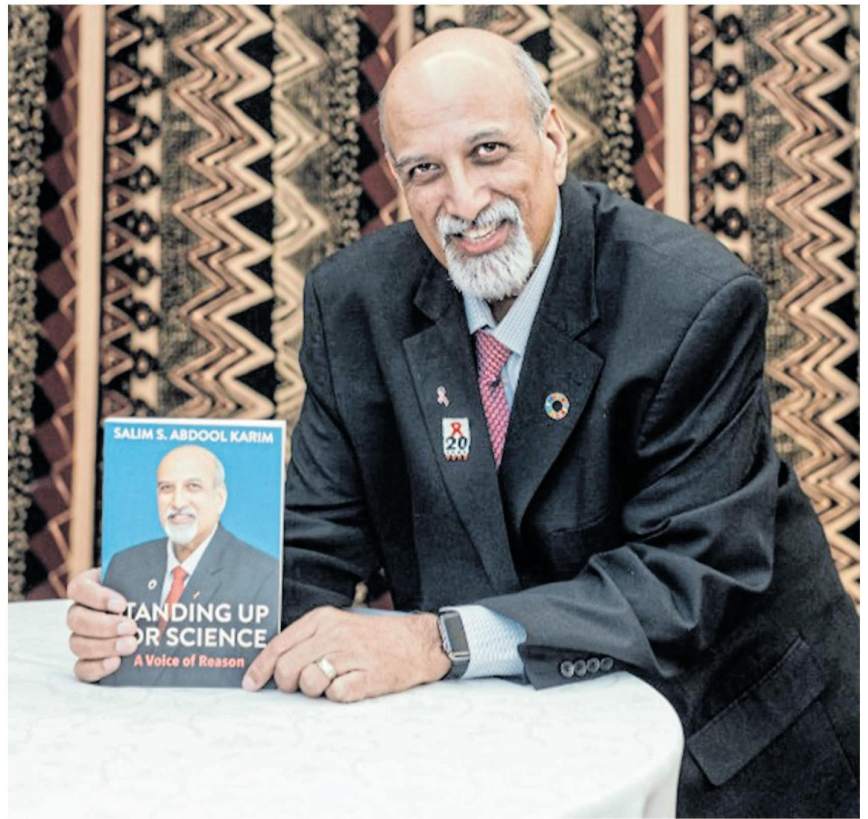
"People say follow the science, but at the early stages of this pandemic, there was very little science to follow.

"What I learnt is that the science we did have available was critical in the discourse, that without that, making decisions that were fundamentally impacting people's rights, movement and livelihood, that science needed to feature in the discourse.

"I was one of the privileged individuals who was called upon to do that. I was fortunate to have with me a very talented and committed group of individuals in the ministerial advisory committee."

Karim touched on the challenges of heading the MAC. "In one section of the book I look at what it takes to get a group of people together — scientists who are hard to herd in the first place — and to come up with decisions in the face of complex science and often where views differed markedly.

"Throughout my entire year on the MAC we did not reach a decision in any one instance where we could not come to an agreement about what our advice should be. Even though we took opposing positions and debated as we should, in the end we understood that we had to put together the best advice we could give." — *TimesLIVE Premium*



**COVID CRUSADER:** Prof Salim Abdool Karim at the launch of his new book at Durban's ICC on Monday. Picture: RAJESH JANTILAL