

# A presence that still looms large

On July 27 2018, the family of Professor Bongani Mayosi and the academic community were shocked to learn that this respected University of Cape Town professor had taken his own life. Now a book has been published celebrating his life and his achievements in the field of cardiology. In the foreword to **Doctor of Hearts: The biography of Bongani Mayosi, a former colleague, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, pays tribute to the activist and doctor**

As the customary Cape Town southeaster blew on a cold winter's evening in 2014, I was sitting across the table from Bongani Mayosi at a restaurant. I had set up this "dinner meeting" to persuade him to apply to succeed me as president of the Medical Research Council. I explained that his leadership, scientific stature and understanding of medical research made him the best candidate to lead the council, as it was now a flourishing research enterprise. He was not keen. He wanted to focus on clinical and research teaching as a cardiologist, which would require spending more time with his students, mentees and patients. He was categoric that seeking one of the highest offices in medical research in South Africa was not on his agenda at the time. This profound moment captured the quintessential Bongani Mayosi – a selfless leader, devoted teacher/mentor, brilliant medical scientist and caring cardiologist who put his trainees' and patients' needs first, while caring little for prestige and high office.

The first time I met Mayosi was 30 years earlier, in 1984. As a senior medical student, I was involved in the orientation programme for the new first-year group and he made an impression on me almost immediately as a bright and curious new medical student. It was another 15 years before I saw him again, when I served on the panel that interviewed him for his Oxford Nuffield Fellowship, but the old memories of him flooded back, as I could now see how he had blossomed into an impressively accomplished scholar of medicine.

But his rise as an academic leader came after his return from Oxford University, when he was appointed as head of the department of internal medicine at the University of Cape Town.

He thrived in this clinical, research and administrative leadership role, taking particular delight in mentoring the next generation of medical specialists. He made a point of getting to his office at 6.30am most mornings for one-on-one mentorship meetings with his students and faculty mentees.

When I was putting together the writing team for The Lancet series on South Africa, he was my automatic first choice to cover noncommunicable diseases.

Throughout this complex task, he was a great pleasure to work with, as he was meticulous about deadlines and produced written text that I rarely had to edit. It was his contribution to The Lancet series on noncommunicable diseases in South Africa that became his most highly cited lead author publication (with 500 citations).

This article is widely cited even to this day, as it captured, as only Mayosi could, both the essence and complexity of the looming challenge of chronic diseases in South Africa. He was and will remain a giant in South African science, with more than 200 peer-reviewed articles that have garnered more than 40 000 citations.

His H-index (a metric for evaluating the cumulative impact of an author's scholarly output and performance) exceeds 70, placing him not just among South Africa's top black researchers, but among all top scientists in history. Mayosi's crowning glory, which was bestowed posthumously, was his election to the US National Academy of Medicine. It was a poignant moment to be there at the academy's 2018 annual meeting, watching his wife, Nonhlanhla, go up to the podium and receive his certificate in Washington, DC.

As I stood there clapping, I was filled with both great pride in his achievements and sadness that we had lost one of South Africa's most eminent medical researchers. His passing has left a void in South African academia that will be felt for years to come.

But his presence still looms large in cardiology, with major research contributions in cardiomyopathy, rheumatic heart disease and multistep fibrosis. His major clinical impact stems from his clinical trial, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, that demonstrated the benefits of steroids in treating TB pericarditis.

An unassuming and humble cardiologist, Mayosi never compromised on academic excellence in his research or in his training of registrars in his department. He was clear about his mission – training for 1 000 PhDs in the health sciences in 10 years. His gift to clinical medicine in South Africa is a whole cohort of young black clinician scientists.

Mayosi's unreserved commitment to this goal, together with his unique combination of brilliance, caring and selflessness, in academic medicine, has ensured his legacy.

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