

HOUSEN MOHAMED COOVADIA

Hoosen Mohamed (Jerry) Coovadia has distinguished himself over many years as a leading paediatric immunologist, a leader in the struggle for a democratic South Africa, a national and international figure in the paediatric world and, more recently, a world authority in the field of paediatric HIV/AIDS, both as a researcher and as a powerful force in shaping policy with respect to the disease.

Born in Durban, one of eight siblings, Jerry Coovadia was educated at Sastri College in Durban. He studied medicine in Bombay, obtaining an M.B., B.S. degree in 1965. While there he met Zube Hamed, a fellow South African medical student. The two later married and have two children.

Professor Coovadia specialised in Paediatrics at the University of Natal and became a Fellow of the College of Paediatricians of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa in 1971. In 1974, he obtained an MSc in Immunology from the University of Birmingham. Returning to South Africa after his studies in the United Kingdom, he rejoined the Department of Paediatrics at the University of Natal and began to work on the immunology of measles in children. His research in that field led to the award of an MD in 1978, the year in which he was appointed Principal Paediatrician and Senior Lecturer. In 1982 he was appointed Associate Professor and in 1986 Ad Hominem Professor. In 1990, he became Professor and Head of the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of Natal, a position he held until the end of 2000. During that time, he created a strong and vibrant department held in high regard for its teaching, clinical excellence and research.

After retiring from this position, Professor Coovadia was appointed Victor Daitz Professor in HIV/AIDS Research, and Director (Biomedical) of the Centre for HIV/AIDS Networking at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine, University of Natal.

In tandem with his busy schedule as an academic paediatrician, Jerry Coovadia continued to play a prominent role in the struggle for a democratic South Africa. He was one of the key figures in the rejuvenation of the Natal Indian Congress in the 1970s and was subsequently elected vice-president. He was also a predominant member of the United Democratic Front and was active in the National Medical and Dental Association, which was set up by progressive doctors after the revelations about the involvement of certain doctors with the security police at the time of the death of Steve Biko.

As a result of his political activities, Professor Coovadia was targeted by the apartheid regime – there was great reluctance on the part of the authorities to approve his appointment as Head of the Department of Paediatrics and his house was bombed during the political turbulence of the early 1990s. Throughout this time he maintained a high public profile and served as an outstanding example to many, both within and outside the health sector.

Professor Coovadia's interest in paediatric HIV/AIDS developed in the early 1990s as the extent of the tragedy in South Africa began to be recognised. His particular interest has been the transmission of the virus from mother to child. Over the years he has attracted numerous large research grants from both local and overseas donors and has built up a powerful research team at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine.

He and his group have published a number of ground breaking research articles. They were the first to suggest that, contrary to received opinion, transmission of HIV from mother to child via breast feeding might be substantially reduced if the mother exclusively breast feeds. While research in this area is not yet conclusive, if the theory is confirmed it will have a significant impact on the health of mothers and children, particularly in developing countries, where formula feeding carries great dangers.

With the support of large international research grants, Professor Coovadia's university research group has extended its research on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases into the rural Hlabisi area of Kwazulu/Natal. Since most research in South Africa and other developing countries is based in urban areas, research in rural settings is clearly of crucial importance.

Professor Coovadia was appointed by the National Department of Health as Chairperson of the National Advisory Group on the HIV/AIDS and STD Programme from 1995 to 1997, while his international stature in the area of HIV/AIDS led to his election as Chairperson of the XIIIth International Conference on AIDS, held in Durban in July 2000. This brought him national and international accolades but also resulted in clashes with some prominent government figures who hold unorthodox views on HIV/AIDS. As with his earlier principled and unwavering opposition to apartheid, he has remained openly critical of government policy on HIV/AIDS where he has felt this to be necessary.

Among the other national leadership positions held by Professor Coovadia over the years are those of Deputy Chairperson of the Transitional National Development Trust of South Africa, Trustee of the Independent Development Trust, and Chairperson of the Commission on Maternal and Child health Policy set up by the Government in 1994. He is also a founder-member of the South African Academy of Sciences.

His research output is prodigious – he has authored or co-authored more than 200 articles in peer reviewed journals, many of them leading international journals. Together with Lucy Wagstaff, a previous head of department at Wits and recipient of an honorary doctorate from Wits, he is co-editor of the textbook *Paediatrics and Child Health*, which is widely used by medical students and junior doctors throughout Southern Africa.

Professor Coovadia has received numerous accolades and awards. He was elected a fellow of the University of Natal in 1995 and was awarded an honorary DSc by the University of Durban-Westville in 1996. In 1999 President Nelson Mandela honoured him with the Star of South Africa for his contribution to democracy and health and he received a silver medal from the Medical Research Council of South Africa for excellence in research. In 2000 he received the International Association of Physicians

in AIDS Care Award; the Heroes in Medicine award in Toronto, Canada; the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights and he was elected a Foreign Member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, USA – an honour that is seldom awarded.

It is with great pride and pleasure that the University of the Witwatersrand should honour such a distinguished paediatrician, researcher and public figure by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.