

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Science in Medicine, honoris causa, Salim Safurdeen Abdool Karim.

Omnium artium medicina nobilissima est - Medicine is the noblest of arts.

Well, not for everyone, and certainly not for the young Slim Karim, whose heart was set on engineering. He was the original techno-geek: standing in a long queue outside “game” in Durban when the first Apple IIe computer came out and intensely fascinated with the new worlds of computers and engineering^[1]. However, it was not to be. There was considerable pressure to choose medicine: from his family, where the belief was that “if you’re not a doctor, you’re not a success^[2]”; the fact that the only bursaries that were offered to him were for medicine^[1], but (besides the finance and the family), medicine was a way to give expression to his values and his caring nature. Thus the world gained one of its foremost HIV AIDS researchers.

One of Slim Karim’s first studies looked at why the AIDS epidemic was so severe in Southern Africa^[3]. The results showed that it was young women, especially teenage girls, who were most vulnerable. These young girls were not being infected by young boys, but by older men, so the problem was not just medical. It was entirely complicated by gender politics, power dynamics, behavioural issues, social issues, economic issues, not to mention the virulent and lethal virus for which there was no known cure.

This was the context for more than 20 years of HIV prevention research that has included everything from strategic planning and epidemiological studies to clinical trials and patent filing. Today Slim Karim is known as “an excellent scholar and an exceptional leader. He has clarity of thought. He understands where things are going, not just in his own field, but in inter-related fields as well^[4]”.

But it was not always so straightforward. Just seven years ago, the journal Nature published a damning criticism of Slim Karim’s proposed tenofovir gel study with the headline: “HIV trial doomed by design”. He wrote a rebuttal, the study went ahead and four years later, at the International Aids conference in Vienna, the results were presented to a global buzz. The media interviews went on until three in the morning, the venue and the overflow venue were packed - and the presentation was greeted with a standing ovation^[5].

The results showed that tenofovir microbicide was effective against HIV infection. What was even more significant is that a microbicide is used by women, and thus the study gave some hope that women could protect **themselves**.

The news made the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Guardian and the Lancet. The microbicide was named one of the Top 10 Scientific Breakthroughs of the year^[6].

Slim Karim co-presented the results in Vienna with his wife, Quarraisha. They have been working as a team since they were married, with Quarraisha doing more of the clinical work, and Slim focusing more on the laboratory studies. He says (jokingly) that they complement each other: she does more of the work and he takes more of the credit^[1]. Quarraisha says: “If Slim were an animal, he would be a lion. Definitely. He’s generous, magnanimous and smart”. He has gravitas and he’s a great leader.

Omnium artium medicina nobilissima est - Medicine is the noblest of all arts – but nobler still when practised with such profound impact for those most in need.

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Science in Medicine, honoris causa, Salim Safurdeen Abdool Karim.

1. Abdool Karim, S.S., *Personal Communication*, 12 May 2014
2. Abdool Karim, Q., *Personal Communication*, 4 June 2014
3. Karim, Q.A., S.S. Abdool Karim, B. Singh, R. Short, and S. Ngxongo, 1992. *Seroprevalence of HIV infection in rural South Africa*. *AIDS*, 6(12): p. 1535-1540.
4. Williamson, C., *Personal Communication*, 2 June 2014
5. Samarasekera, U., 2012. *Salim S Abdool Karim: perseverance pays off*. *The Lancet*, 380(9851): p. e7.

6. **City Press News, *100 World Class South Africans: Salim and Quarraisha Abdool Karim*, in *City Press*, 6 June 2013.**