

OBITUARY

Gita Ramjee: Pioneering HIV scientist, friend, feminist and mother



Gita Ramjee, who had lived and studied in the UK and in east Africa, walked into my and Professor Miriam Adhikari's rooms at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine years ago, with the goal of pursuing a postgraduate degree. She did a superb study for her doctorate on the detailed analysis of urinary proteins, which enabled clinicians to accurately diagnose the severity of kidney disease in children without having to undertake a kidney biopsy, a rather unpleasant procedure, not without some risk, done under local anaesthesia.

In February this year, we read with horror and disbelief about the growing numbers of deaths from COVID-19 in China. It brought to our minds images of the Black Death in medieval Europe and Asia, and the 1918/19 influenza pandemic (Spanish flu), but at the time we were still observers to this looming global tragedy. With Gita's unexpected passing from COVID-19, the reality of all those lives lost has become a

personal tragedy for every one of us, her colleagues, friends and family.

Our lives in medicine, health and research are bound together by a crisp fabric of love, friendship and collegiality – of family, friends and professional colleagues. They give us a foundation of support, love and laughter, of work successes and research tribulations. Gita was part of the lives of everyone at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal – known to us in different ways, as a scientist, a colleague, a friend, a mother and a wife. None of us ever thought that her life would be taken away so quickly.

Gita was a professional colleague and friend of Helen Rees. They met in the late 1990s when they did the first microbicide trial together, exploring the effectiveness of nonoxynol-9 in protecting sex workers against HIV. While nonoxynol-9 didn't work, it started Gita on two trajectories that were to become her life's work. The first was to continue with the scientific endeavour of finding products that would protect women against HIV, and the second was to care for the lives of the women in her studies and beyond, many of whom were vulnerable and voiceless in our society.

Helen Rees became familiar with Gita's no-nonsense work style when Gita, Kim Dickson and Helen co-chaired the 2006 International Microbicides Conference. Gita's stated goal from the outset was that this was going to be the best conference ever, which meant that not only did they have to have an outstanding scientific programme, but they also had to stage a flamboyant two-hour singing and dancing opening ceremony. It was at that conference that Helen also got a glimpse of Gita's negotiation skills and her enjoyment of the finer things

in life, when she secured the three co-chairs the best rooms in the hotel, at no extra cost and adjacent to the spa.

Gita's most prominent achievement, in retrospect, has been tearing open the barriers of male dominance over the higher reaches of tertiary education and research, together with the right to the critical role of leadership in these fields. She laboured unceasingly to nurture the loyalty of her outstanding team of researchers over many years. Her achievements in these areas of endeavour have long been the preserve of men, and in South Africa, inescapably, the sanctuary from which people of colour had been excluded. In many instances, these exclusions are still detectable. However, one of the central inequities between men and women is that women, even at the heights of their power, are often still expected to be responsible for what are believed to be the traditional female responsibilities of a housewife. These relationships are becoming harder to justify or retain in today's societies, as women often exceed the attributes and competencies of men. In my own family both my wife and my daughter are ahead of me in key competencies, and in my circle of friends, the women are often in advance of their male partners.

Gita was a leader of the men and women in her team at the SAMRC, and their faithful and trusted colleague. Despite these loyalties, and maybe because of them, all of us knew that her true pride and passion was her family – her husband Pravin, her two adored sons, and her grandson.

Hoosen Mahomed Coovadia

*Maternal, Adolescent and Child Health
Institute, School of Public Health, University of
the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
hcoovadia@match.org.za*