KEY RESEARCH IN FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

Scientist awarded by those he helps

Leanne Jansen

The African Union has honoured Durban scientist Professor Salim Abdool Karim with the $100,000 (R1.1 million) Kwame Nkrumah Award for his research on HIV prevention and treatment on the continent.

The award was presented to Abdool Karim in Addis Ababa at the weekend by AU Commission chairwoman Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.

In the past year, Abdool Karim has received the Royal Society of South Africa’s most senior honour, the John W Herschel Medal, and an honorary degree in medicine from UCT.

However, the Kwame Nkrumah Award is particularly special to the director of the Centre for Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Capriza), at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It was acknowledged from the beneficiaries of his work, rather than from fellow scientists.

“The biggest impact our research has had is in Africa. The problems of TB and HIV co-infection, and of HIV in young women — all of those challenges are the factors driving the spread of HIV, and the deaths from HIV in Africa. What we do is focused on finding solutions to the biggest problems in the HIV epidemic,” said Abdool Karim.

Half of the award money will go to the Medical Research Council, and the other half will be invested in Capriza.

The interest will be used by both organisations to bring prominent scientists from around the world to deliver lectures in South Africa.

“This award recognises the importance of science and the contributions of scientific innovation in the path to a healthier Africa,” said Abdool Karim.

Distinguished local scientist Professor Jerry Coovadia said Abdool Karim was not only an internationally renowned figure, but also had a track record of fighting for the rights of the dispossessed and impoverished in South Africa.

Last year, a team of South African and US scientists led by Abdool Karim discovered how to clone potent antibodies in the blood of a rural KwaZulu-Natal woman, which were able to kill HIV.

Abdool Karim is also a newly appointed member to the editorial board of the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine — and the first scientist from Africa to hold this position.

Several of the more than 300 journal articles that he has published have been in the New England Journal of Medicine. He is also a member of the editorial board of HIV and Infectious Diseases, AIDS Reviews and Aids Research and Human Retroviruses, and of the global advisory board of The Lancet — HIV.

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe; Cameroon winner of the Basic Sciences, Technology and Innovation award, Professor Timoleon Crepin Kofane, second left; and African Union Commission chairwoman Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, far right; with Professor Salim Abdool Karim as he receives the Kwame Nkrumah Award for Earth and Life Sciences at the African Union buildings in Addis Ababa, at the weekend.