Top Africa award for SA’s ‘crazy’ Aids guru

‘Slim’ Karim’s dogged approach to HIV fight earns AU accolade

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IT takes a special kind of crazy to pursue a career in scientific research, says South Africa’s foremost HIV expert, Professor Salim “Slim” Abdool Karim.

“That’s because when we fail, we don’t do it quietly in some dark lab somewhere. We do it spectacularly on a big stage with the world’s attention, the media, patients and other scientists all watching us,” says the clinical infectious epidemiologist.

After seven failed attempts at breakthroughs in HIV prevention, Karim co-led a 2003 landmark study — with his wife, Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim — that seven years later demonstrated the efficacy of tenofovir gel globally. An independent study to confirm the gel’s effectiveness is in its final stages. Tenofovir is an antiretroviral vaginal gel used to combat HIV infection.

Yesterday, falling was the furthest thing from Karim’s mind as the spotlight shone on him when the African Union’s new chairman, Robert Mugabe, presented him with the most prestigious prize for science in Africa at an AU sitting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He received the Kwame Nkrumah Scientific Award, which comes with R1.1-million, in recognition of his research on HIV prevention and treatment in Africa, and was also congratulated by President Jacob Zuma.

Karim, who is also credited with reviving the struggling Medical Research Council during a two-year stint that ended in March last year, is optimistic about South Africa’s ability to conduct rigorous ongoing scientific research.

His scientific breakthroughs and leadership decisions in the health field have not been without controversy and criticism, but Karim, a graduate of the University of KwaZulu-Natal medical school, keeps going.

“It takes a certain kind of person to be persistent in the research field,” he said.

“Instant breakthroughs are rare. Usually, it takes many attempts before success is achieved. For example, it took Thomas Edison thousands of attempts until he finally got [the light bulb] right. With each success, I am sure we can eventually change the course of the HIV epidemic in Africa.”

Karim is the co-inventor of two HIV-prevention patents. He is also part of the team developing a broadly neutralising antibody that acts as passive immunisation and is a precursor to a future vaccine.

Karim’s workload is daunting. He is the pro-vice-chancellor for research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa, which links five local research facilities with Columbia University in New York.

He also serves as an adviser to several governments and some of the world’s leading agencies in Aids and global health, including the World Health Organisation, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS and the Global Fund to fight Aids, TB and Malaria. Then there are his scientific advisory responsibilities for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Last month, Karim became the first African scientist to be appointed to serve on the editorial board of the New England Journal of Medicine, the “most widely read, cited and influential general medical periodical in the world”.

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ON THE BIG STAGE: Professor Salim Abdool Karim received the Kwame Nkrumah Scientific Award at the AU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, yesterday in recognition of his research on HIV prevention and treatment in Africa.