University of Cape Town vice-chancellor Max Price, left, and celebrated Durban-born Professor Salim Abdool Karim, as Karim receives an honorary degree in medicine, in recognition of the international impact of his groundbreaking research in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

University honours Durban professor

Leanne Jansen

FOR HIS pioneering research and its international impact on the fight against HIV/AIDS, Durban-born Professor Salim Abdool Karim was capped with an honorary degree in medicine by the University of Cape Town yesterday.

Karim’s speech to students at the graduation ceremony conveyed the message that success required perseverance.

In an interview with The Mercury, Karim said that the discovery of the effect of tenofovir gel as a microbicide in preventing both HIV and genital herpes was the result of 18 years of toll and repeated failure.

The study which he co-led with his wife, Quarraisha, provided the first evidence that antiretroviral drugs could prevent sexual transmission of HIV infection.

“You really have to persevere in this life. There are no quick solutions. It takes a lot of hard work and a lot of failure,” he said.

“And we were not falling in some dark back room, it was in the full glare of the medical community. To give up would have been unthinkable,” said Karim, who heads the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa, which has its headquarters at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

UCT praised his work as epitomising the momentous contribution that innovative multidisciplinary science and medical technology could make to disease prevention, treatment and global health.

While he has numerous international awards to his name, this is the first honorary degree to be conferred upon him by a South African university.

“I am very proud and humbled to be acknowledged by UCT in this way. They say it’s hardest to be recognised in your own country and this is recognising a lifetime’s worth of work,” he said.

The citation of Karim, delivered by Professor Alison Lewis, revealed that as a youngster, Karim was “a technology who had his heart set on engineering. But family and financial pressures, and Karim’s own values and nature, would see him choose medicine.

Earlier this year, a team of South African and US researchers led by Karim discovered how to clone the antibodies in the blood of a rural KwaZulu-Natal woman which were able to kill multiple strains of HIV.

Having made a few milligrams of the antibodies, the next step is to manufacture enough to see if it can prevent HIV in monkeys.

“I feel we are at the threshold of some new science which will lead to a vaccine. A vaccine is still a long way away, but I’m not afraid of taking something on for the next 20 years of my career,” he said.

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