

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Medicine, honoris causa, Jerry Coovadia.

A central theme of Jerry Coovadia's life is the theme of somebody with a passion for acquiring knowledge, a passion for making sense of it and a passion for using it to make a difference.

Although he ended up in medicine, English literature and reading were his first loves. As a child, living under apartheid, having a hunger for reading wasn't straightforward. For where are you to find books? When a library was finally built near the Brook Street Cemetery, it was a momentous occasion. So the young Coovadia could at last (in his own words) just read and read and read.

He was reading everything in sight. He was reading paperbacks and poetry and Shakespeare - but the reading was not just for fun — it was (and still is) part of a need to be literate in the broadest possible sense. It is not only a reason to live but also gives a meaning to his life (Cele, 2002).

After one dreadful year at the then profoundly racist University of Natal medical school, Coovadia went to Grant Medical College at the University of Bombay. He made friends, he met his wife, he discovered the ideas of socialism and communism, and of course he read. He read Lenin and Marx, he read about socialism in China and Tanzania and he read Franz Omar Fanon on the Algerian struggle for independence.

Arriving back at King Edward Hospital in Durban was a shock. There was apartheid in its "ugliest and most pervasive form" (Cele, 2002), but also the shock of being a new doctor on his first shift in casualty and having to deal with a stab wound to the chest. He immediately put his energies into becoming a better doctor. He refocused on medicine and qualified as a paediatrician.

Then in 1989, the very first child with HIV/AIDS was admitted to Dr Coovadia's ward. Then came the second child. Before long, the wards were overwhelmed with HIV and AIDS patients and his initial forays into research began.

Worldwide, there are 33 million people who are HIV positive. 33 million! Every year, half a million children die from AIDS. Think about this: every day in Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 1000 children acquire HIV infection from their mothers (UNAIDS, 2009). The capacity of this hall is 1200 — so imagine nearly every seat in this hall occupied by a mother and her newborn to whom she has just transmitted her HIV. And that's just today. To imagine tomorrow's new infections, we would have to clear the hall and fill every seat again. And again the next day. And again the day after that.

The brilliance of Coovadia is that he has focussed his research at the heart of this plague: mother to child transmission of HIV (Coovadia, 2005). His first United Nations grant on mother to child transmission set him onto the research path. His credentials grew and he was invited to chair the groundbreaking XIII International Conference on AIDS, in Durban in 2000.

This is one of the most successful AIDS conferences ever to be held. It was called "Breaking the Silence". And break the silence it did. This was in the dark days, the garlic and beetroot days, the days when HIV/AIDS as a leading killer was denied. But **this** was the meeting at which the need for **both** prevention **and** Anti Retroviral treatment was incontrovertibly established (Mthembu, 2000).

Professor Coovadia has been recognised by many: the Star of South Africa by President Nelson Mandela for his contribution to democracy; membership of the United States Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences; and the Silver Medal by the Medical Research Council for his achievements in medical research.

But his dedication as a clinician and teacher has also brought us trained postgraduate students, doctors, nurses and other informed medical professionals.

We are deeply grateful to Professor Coovadia not only for his intellectual curiosity and his passion for knowledge, but also for his commitment to use this knowledge for the public good. He is making a real difference in the lives of South Africans living with HIV/AIDS.

Vice-Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, honoris causa, Jerry Coovadia.

References

- Cele, M., 2002. Interview with Jerry Hoosen Coovadia, <http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/Audio/VOR/Transcript.htm>.
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UNAIDS, 2009. Report on the Global AIDS epidemic.