

## AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Foreign Associate of the National Academy of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, United States (2004)
- Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in the United Kingdom (1997)
- Founder Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) (1996)

## DEFINING MOMENT

When he was asked to chair the task team that wrote the antiretroviral (ARV) treatment plan for South Africa. "After eight tumultuous weeks of work, assisted by 50 of the world's leading experts in the treatment of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), we won Cabinet approval in November 2003 for the R10 billion-a-year programme that has now become the world's largest AIDS treatment programme."

## WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

Every morning he reads the New Testament in ancient Greek, side by side with the English version.

## SHAPING SOUTH AFRICA'S FUTURE IN AIDS/HIV

The grandson of an anti-apartheid intellectual, Anthony Mbewu left South Africa at the age of three to live in exile with his family. Mbewu's grandfather had left the country in 1960, the same year Mbewu was born. The cardiologist and former President of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) had felt that there was no future for him in his country. In 1963, he returned to fetch Mbewu. The family settled in Zambia but in 1967 Mbewu, his mother and grandmother moved to the United Kingdom, his home for the next 30 years.

At school, young Mbewu excelled. He gained entry to the University of Oxford aged only 16, having skipped a year of secondary school. In 1980, after completing his preclinical BA at Oxford, Mbewu finished his medical studies at the Royal London Hospital Medical School. After a few years in London working as a junior doctor he moved to Manchester where he specialised in internal medicine and cardiology. Mbewu was awarded his research doctorate (MD) in 1994 from the University of London for research into the role of lipoprotein(a) in coronary heart disease.

The choice of a medical career was partly due to necessity as a South African living in exile. "I was more inclined towards the arts, but I knew I had to choose a career that would grant me a welcome in any country in the world," he says.

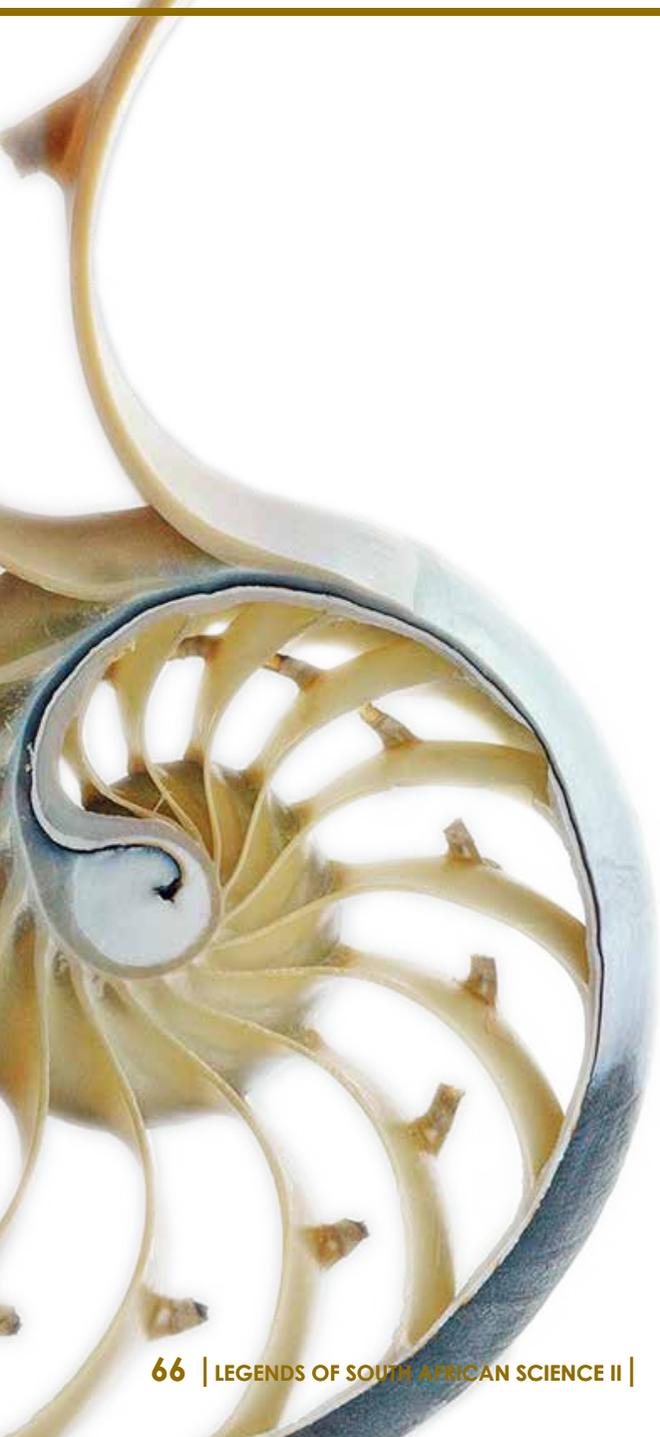
The release of President Nelson Mandela from jail in 1990 came as a surprise to many of the thousands of South Africans living in exile across the globe, and Mbewu was no exception. "I had assumed I was never going to be able to return to South Africa. I had married a British woman and we had two sons." Mbewu and his wife resolved to head back to South Africa to witness the rebirth of a country. Some of Mbewu's British colleagues thought he was crazy to go back to a country still so suffused with racism. "I said to them 'I know that, but I want to be part of building the new South Africa'."

Mbewu moved to South Africa in 1994, arriving weeks before the first democratic election. "I voted twice in the United Kingdom before I got to vote in my own country." Caught up in the enthusiasm about the rainbow nation, Mbewu dreamt that South Africa would have its own equivalent of the United Kingdom's National Health Service within a few decades. He started at the University of Cape Town (UCT) as a senior research fellow, then a consultant cardiologist but he found racial and political transformation at the institution slow. In 1996 he was appointed Executive Director of Research at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), on whose board he had served since his return to South Africa. He found the institution more dynamic than academia. "The MRC, because it was government-funded, had no choice but to change radically."

In 2005, Mbewu became President of the SAMRC, a post he held for five years. During this time he served on a number of international health committees and as an advisor to the World Health Organization's tuberculosis, non-communicable diseases and mental health programmes. "There were a lot of initiatives and I was at the right place at the right time."

In 2010, after serving his term at the head of the SAMRC, he was appointed as Executive Director for the Global Forum for Health Research in Geneva,





Switzerland. This was a challenging time for Mbewu: While serving at the helm of the SAMRC, the rapid rise of HIV in South Africa was recognised as a growing and urgent problem, with Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa from 1999 to 2008, coming under fire for not rolling out life-saving antiretroviral treatment through the country's public health system. The controversy surrounding Mbeki and HIV did not spare the health officials who worked under his administration, including Mbewu.

"I think we were tardy in terms of establishing treatment programmes," Mbewu admits. "But we did manage to do great things in the end." Under him, the SAMRC initiated the South African AIDS Vaccine Initiative (SAAVI). It launched initiatives to develop microbicides that killed HIV on contact. Mbewu chaired the task team that developed the treatment plan for HIV/AIDS in South Africa, laying the foundations for the world's largest treatment programme.

Mbewu's career then took an unusual turn. From 2012 to 2017 he was Chief Executive of the Government Printing Works in Pretoria — a state entity that produces official documentation like passports, identity books and matriculation examination papers. Mbewu was in charge of rolling out production of the 'smart ID card' technology in 2013. However, after five years in that role he wanted to return to clinical medicine. Since he couldn't find a senior position in Cape Town, he went back to the United Kingdom where he is doing locum or stand-in jobs at a number of different hospitals. He intends to come back to South Africa some time, but he plans to stay in clinical medicine until his retirement.

Mbewu says he "absolutely feels South African", even though he has spent a large part of his life living abroad. "I think South Africa is a beacon of hope for the African continent and the world – after 350 difficult years of colonialism and apartheid, we have emerged without bloodshed and with a country that is multi-ethnic and multicultural."

Mbewu's time abroad has helped him to see South Africa as a place of potential and promise. In the Brexit-era, the United Kingdom's young people are not positive about the future. "It is amazing to see the optimism and the excitement about the potential in South Africa – you don't see that in the UK. I'm proud to be South African."

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C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

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# Legends of South African Science II

**Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)**

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