

Statement: Academic freedom and the values of science

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

25 May 2020

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) wishes to record its grave concerns about the political attack on one of its Members, Professor Glenda Gray, who is also President of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and a member of the Ministerial Advisory Council (MAC) appointed by the Minister of Health to advise on matters relating to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In mid-May 2020, Professor Gray participated in media interviews during which she - among other prominent scientists - expressed criticism on the implementation of some aspects of the lockdown regulations announced by government. The lockdown itself is a mechanism to contain the spread of the coronavirus among the population of South Africa.

In a measured reply, the Minister of Health issued a statement disputing aspects of Professor Gray's reported remarks. He also expressed concern that such views made by a member of the MAC could undermine public confidence in the efforts by government to issue regulations in good faith so as to give effect to policy. The Minister was in his rights to challenge Professor Gray on her views regarding certain aspects of the lockdown regulations.

What we, however, find extremely alarming is the subsequent actions by the Acting Director General of the Department of Health, Dr Anban Pillay. Dr Pillay did something that should raise red flags in our constitutional democracy. It is not simply that he accused this globally renowned scientist from making false allegations without compelling evidence for his case. Dr Pillay went further. He abused the power of his office to write to the Chairperson of the Medical Research Council recommending an investigation into the conduct of its President for the simple reason that she held different views from the political authorities on the lockdown restrictions. Without much subtlety, he reminds the Board Chair that the SAMRC is "an entity" of government implying that scientists working there have no independent voice - a position that has been challenged in other statements defending the statutory independence of the SAMRC.

As serious, Dr Pillay's actions represent a violation of the right to academic freedom that includes the right to freedom of academic research (s.16 (d) of the Constitution). We therefore wish to record our objection in the strongest possible terms to what appears to be the bullying of a scientist who not only heads up one of the nation's most prestigious research institutions, but who has a



history of courageous service as a medical professional in fighting epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and now COVID-19.

On matters of COVID-19, scientists around the world disagree on things like modelling projections of infection and death rates, as well as the efficacy of full and partial lockdown strategies as mitigating measures. This is, after all, a novel coronavirus and nobody has perfect knowledge on the course and effects of the disease on human populations. It is in this context that we believe Professor Gray's views were completely within her competence as a researcher and medical specialist of international standing. It is also her right as a scientist to differ from political authority on questions of science.

As the Academy of Science of South Africa, we believe that freedom of scientific enquiry is fundamental to the health of our constitutional democracy. Academics and researchers need the space to undertake independent research in an environment that is free from fear, intimidation and political interference. To threaten researchers and to muzzle their voice would have a chilling effect on creativity, innovation and experimentation.

We believe that the spirit of science was beautifully captured in President Ramaphosa's address to the nation on 24 May 2020 when he said that "We appreciate the diverse and sometimes challenging views of the scientists and health professionals in our country, which stimulate public debate and enrich our response."

It is this spirit that should inform the public response to science and scientists as they do their vital work.

On behalf of the Council of the Academy of Science of South Africa

Professor Jonathan D Jansen, President

Professor Barney Pityana, Vice-President

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