



From the desk of the Women's Wing

Global recognition for SA public health expert Helen Rees

SAMA Communications

SA's Prof. Helen Rees was one of six global public health champions celebrated at the recent World Health Assembly, receiving the Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize in recognition of her contributions to global health.

Dr Lee Jong-wook was a former director-general of the WHO who died in office, but his legacy was extraordinary, Rees told Yoliswa Sobuwa of *Health-e News*.

"He dedicated his life to improving health outcomes for the poorest communities, and played a central role in expanding access to antiretroviral treatment for HIV. Receiving a prize in his name is a tremendous personal honour."

But it's also a proud moment for SA, she added. "It shows the world we have exceptional scientists whose work is making a global difference."

A defining moment in her life, she told *Health-e News*, was in 1994, when she established the research unit at the University of the Witwatersrand focused on reproductive health and HIV – known as Wits RHI.

"Before that, I worked in clinics in Alexandra Township as a paediatrician. Founding that unit launched my research career, and soon after, being appointed chair of the Medicines Control Council marked the beginning of my policy and regulatory work, both nationally and internationally."

Later, she also served as chair of the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunisation for the WHO, expanding her experience in global immunisation strategy.

Her global recognition comes as the Wits RHI grapples with devastating funding cuts.

"The large PEPfar-supported programmes that we ran have been significantly impacted, with staff losses and a reduction in direct support to the department. We are now working with the department on a transitional plan, but it's going to be difficult."

"On the research side, the impact is equally profound, and we are focused on engaging new donors, identifying alternative funding streams and realigning our research

agenda with both national and regional priorities, while also responding to global health challenges."

On how sustainable the current donor model was for public health research and service delivery in Africa, she said this was a question the entire African region was now asking.

"For a long time, donor support, especially from high-income countries, was invaluable. But it was never a sustainable model. Health service delivery is ultimately the responsibility of governments, and SA acknowledges that. However, in many lower-income countries across the continent, it's still an enormous challenge to fully fund essential health services."

"I don't believe the answer is to withdraw donor funding. Instead, we need a smarter, more strategic approach, continuing support while reprioritising which programmes and which countries are most in need."

Health challenges like pandemics, TB, HIV, or non-communicable diseases require multicountry studies and shared solutions

Rees said for countries such as SA, there's an expectation to self-fund most services.

"On the research side, however, collaboration across borders remains critical. Health challenges like pandemics, TB, HIV, or non-communicable diseases require multicountry studies and shared solutions."

The funding cuts will also dramatically affect Africa's ambition to manufacture its own vaccines and pharmaceuticals.

"Take, for instance, the rollout of lenacapavir, the promising twice-yearly injectable PrEP drug that could

revolutionise HIV prevention. It's incredibly effective, and we had plans, backed by co-funding, including US support, to scale it across the region. That plan is now uncertain ... it's a major loss.

"Continued investment in African-led research is not just support, it's smart, forward-thinking global collaboration"

"More broadly, we risk setbacks in access to HIV, TB and malaria medications, as well as diagnostic tools."

However, when it comes to vaccine and therapeutic manufacturing, there is still momentum.

"The African Union remains committed, and other funding sources are still on the table. That ambition, to

manufacture our vaccines and medicines, will persist, even in the face of donor cuts."

Rees said research "is fundamental to every country's development, whether high or low income".

"Healthcare is expensive. Even wealthy nations struggle to fund it effectively. That's why innovation is essential. We need new tools, treatments and delivery models that improve efficiency and outcomes.

"African institutions like Wits RHI have demonstrated that they can lead world-class research and deliver real-world solutions. We are part of a global ecosystem. Whether it's vaccines, diagnostics, or strategies to improve care delivery, these advances benefit everyone.

"Continued investment in African-led research is not just support, it's smart, forward-thinking global collaboration."

Source: Medical Brief, 18 June 2025: <https://www.medicalbrief.co.za/global-recognition-for-sa-public-health-expert-helen-rees/> and Health-e News, 9 June 2025: <https://health-e.org.za/2025/06/09/south-african-expert-dr-lee-jong-wook-memorial-prize/>.



Prof. Helen Rees accepting the Dr Lee Jong Wook Memorial Prize for Public Health (photo: supplied)