



From the desk of the Women's Wing

Prof. Helen Rees recognised in Africa Health 20

SAMA Communications

Prof. Helen Rees, one of SA's most well-known women scientists, is a visionary in the fields of vaccines, HIV and adolescent health who has shaped policy and advanced equity across Africa and beyond. The 20 leaders shaping health across Africa list recognises African leaders who are shaping the continent's health agenda in real time, through institutional power, scientific leadership, policy reform, emergency response, manufacturing, regulation, financing and accountability.

Prof. Helen Rees is included in Africa Health 20 because she represents a form of influence that is both scientific and policy shaping. As founder and executive director of the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI), she leads one of SA's most important research and implementation institutions, with work spanning HIV, TB, reproductive health and vaccines.

Her influence ... lives in policy, public health strategy and the institutions that translate evidence into action

She is also an *ad hominem* professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Wits, and an honorary professor in the Department of Infectious and Tropical Diseases of the Clinical Research Unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She holds a Master's in social and political sciences from Cambridge University, and in 2002 became an alumnus of Harvard Business School. She holds a Doctor of Science (Medicine) *honoris causa* from the University of London, and a Doctor of Law *honoris causa* from Rhodes University.

Prof. Rees has held key roles in SA and global regulatory bodies, including the SA Medicines Control Council.

She has won many international and national awards for her contribution to global health and to science, including being made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2001 by Queen Elizabeth II. In 2016, she was awarded the SA National Order of the Baobab for her contribution to medicine and to medical research. In 2022, Helen was made an Officer of the French National Order of Merit by President Macron for her contribution to global health and to the COVID-19 response, and also received the Platinum SA National Batho Pele Award for excellence in contribution to the SA COVID-19 response. In 2022 she was named a "standout voice" in African public health by Harvard Public Health.



Prof. Helen Rees

Her influence is not simply academic. It lives in policy, public health strategy and the institutions that translate evidence into action. In 2025, Helen received the prestigious Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health from the WHO, one of the highest global honours in the field of public health. It recognises her "exceptional contributions" to global health, particularly in vaccine research, outbreak response and health equity. In addition to the WHO accolade, Helen was also recently elected a Fellow of the African Academy of Sciences, joining a distinguished network of scholars committed to advancing science and innovation across the African continent.

We congratulate Prof. Rees on this outstanding achievement. She is an inspiration to us all.